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CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
A Portrait with Background

By Marya Zaturenska

THRESHOLD AND HEARTH

COLD MORNING SKY

THE LISTENING LANDSCAPE

THE GOLDEN MIRROR

A HISTORY OF AMERICAN POETRY—1900–1940

in collaboration with Horace Gregory

Christina Rossetti



A PORTRAIT WITH BACKGROUND

By

MARYA ZATURENSKA

*The tide of fashion is a stream too strong,
For pastoral brooks that gently flow and sing,
But Nature is their source and earth and sky,
Their annual offerings to her current bring
Thy gentle muse and memory need no sigh,
For thine shall murmur on to many a spring,
When prouder streams are summer-burnt and dry.*

—JOHN CLARE ("To the Memory of Bloomfield")

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

New York

1949

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FOR
HILDA D. ALDINGTON (II. D.)
*with affection and
admiration*

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CHAPTER ONE

*The Italian Exiles: A Study
in Genteel Poverty*

IN 1832 a milkman paid his morning call on a small shabby house in London. The address was 38 Charlotte Street, near Portland Place. It had once been a rather fashionable neighborhood; Samuel Rogers, the banker poet, had lived there and the houses when new had worn an air of fresh, bright Regency elegance. But the neighborhood had sunk, the atmosphere was now one of genteel poverty, or of poverty that had long given up any pretensions to being anything else but poverty. The milkman had noticed Number 38: foreigners lived there—Italians—and the atmosphere was respectable and yet very odd. Even the children seemed “different,” and today they were more peculiar than ever. There, in the long dark corridor, a hazel-eyed boy of about four was sitting before a hobbyhorse and carefully sketching it. The milkman was enchanted at seeing what he called “a baby making a picture” and told the story to neighbors who somehow recorded it for posterity. He may have made some comment to the baby’s mother, a tall handsome fair-haired woman, who carried herself with a calm dignity that gave her the air of a great lady who had only dropped in on a visit to that small shabby house. She might have been mistaken for an English-woman, so tall and fair and quietly poised—but no, the milkman might have noticed there was something Italian about her eyes, something un-English in that carefully held-in emotional inten-

sity. She was half English, half Italian, daughter of a Roman Catholic Italian father and an English Protestant mother—and in the conflict the English blood seemed to have won the victory. But although she was a good high-church Anglican something southern, warm—"enthusiastic" the eighteenth century would have called it—entered her religious fervors. She was apt to be too intense, a little fanatical when her religious emotions were touched.

But these were things that the milkman would not have thought about or have known about as he walked down Charlotte Street's long unlovely length of decaying, genteel houses. No doubt as he left Number 38 a bill had been paid as carefully and scrupulously as ever, but he might have seen lines of half-concealed worry under the eyes of the fair, tall lady.

It was a queer household, indeed, remote from the rest of the neighborhood as from the England or London of the 1830's. But it was a household that was separated from the rest of the world by a strain of genius, and though today a block of modern flats marks the place where the house stood—and its name was afterwards changed to Hallam Street—a metal tablet has been put on the site of Number 38. It records the fact that on this site stood a house that had been the birthplace of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. That this house also was the birthplace of his sister Christina, the tablet does not trouble to record. Still there is some justice in this, for Dante Gabriel Rossetti (the baby who was seen sketching a horse) was the sun around whom this household revolved; his personality in life and even in death exhaled a spectacular richness, excitement, and splendor. Christina would not have grudged it to him, and, as for herself, in the last years of her life, she learned the poetic validity, the strong eloquence of silence. Her fame too, though unplacarded, would be secure.

But it is to the year 1832 that we must return, and Dante

Gabriel is four years old. He is not the oldest, for there is a five-year-old sister, Maria Francesca. The younger children are William Michael, who is now three years old, and Christina Georgina, who is the baby. She is a very pretty, temperamental, hazel-eyed child of two.

2

High above the Adriatic lies the little town of Vasto in the Abruzzi, once a province of the old kingdom of Naples. To this day it has little charm for tourists except its antiquity, its immemorial squalor, and its crooked narrow streets. Its sea-ringed walls faced the Middle Ages, and from them we can see, afar, austere broad plains and a line of delicate olive trees and, around all, a blue horizon of mountains. The chief inhabitants seem to be olive growers and fishermen. The town, obscure, lost, mountain-shadowed, has its place in English literature, for it was in this landscape with its fluid sea-line that the Rossetti family had their origin. The birthplace of Dante Gabriel's and Christina's father has been bought by the town and is now a museum in his honor. The market place, the principal centre of the town's life and social activities, is named Piazza de Gabriele Rossetti after the progenitor of the famous English Rossettis, and the one theatre, the centre of its cultural activities, is also named after Gabriele Rossetti. The fame of the English Rossettis may have reached Vasto after many years, but the tribute to Gabriele Rossetti is a tribute to himself, and to himself alone. For he is Vasto's poet, and it is as a poet in his own right that Vasto honors him. If his work has not worn well, if greater poets who learned from him * have usurped the fame that in his youth he may well have thought would be immortal—he has achieved that

* Carducci is said to have been an admirer of Gabriele Rossetti's poetry in his youth, and to have been influenced by it.

rare position denied to many of the world's most imposing immortals. He is honored and is a prophet in his own country.

The Rossettis sprang from the people; and though in after years Dante Gabriel made some vague, romantic claim of being descended from the great family of the town—the Della Guardias whose head, the Marchese del Vasto, was his father's first patron—neither Gabriele nor the unpretentious historian of the Rossetti family, William Michael, ever made such a claim. That there may have been some feudal relationship is possible; but many years later, when he applied for a post at the new University of London, Gabriele Rossetti wrote, "I was born of the people and wish once more to throw in my lot with theirs." Though fate had thrown him into social atmospheres that would have seemed grand and strange to his parents, Gabriele always possessed the simplicity, the innocent warmth, and the shrewdness of the peasant stock from which he sprung. His father, Nicola Rossetti, had been a blacksmith in Vasto and had married the daughter of a shoemaker. He had four sons and three daughters; and through what sacrifices, toil, and pride in them this couple, honored in Vasto for their strength of character and integrity, managed to educate them above their station, we can only guess. The oldest son became a priest, and later a canon in one of Vasto's two collegiate churches; Domenico, another son, became a lawyer of some literary attainments. One brother, who was less ambitious, became a barber; but he, too, had poetic gifts and perhaps some satiric propensities which were directed toward his more successful brothers, for legend records that he did an impromptu parody of the "Dies Irae" that greatly distressed and annoyed his clerical brother. Of Nicola, their father and the ancestor of the Rossettis, the mortuary inscription in Vasto reads, "Poor and honorable, he lovingly sent in boyhood to their first studies his sons carefully nurtured in childhood."

But it is Gabriele, the third son, that stands in stone in the market place at Vasto. Born in 1783, poet, composer, painter of sorts, evidently a vivid personality all fire and enthusiasm and full of the attitudes of the Romantic movement sweeping with revolution through Europe, Gabriele might have stepped out of a novel done by a bad imitator of Stendhal. His type was beginning to create itself all over Europe, the poets who were more Alfierian than Alfieri, more Byronic than Byron. He was indeed a forerunner of many better poets, and in his day his reputation was rather high in Italy. Revolutionary hymns came to his lips with great fluency and awful facility, and the most high-flown rhetoric—defiance to kings and tyrants, declamations to Liberty, “Lovely art Thou with stars in Thy hair,” and lyrics of love and patriotism. All were praised, all admired. His was one of the voices that eventually stirred the Italian people into a sense of their own nationality and a united Italy. As we read the letters and the accounts of the man, we find ourselves smiling and yet stirred by the respect and affection that all who knew him felt for him. He talked well and vividly and had the indefinable magnetism that was inherited by his son Dante Gabriel. Another invaluable gift was his (a gift often so valuable to the poor artist), the gift of interesting wealthy and influential people. There is a miniature taken when he was in political exile at Malta; for, of course, his political ideas were not admired by the Austrian police, and he passed many years in exile. The miniature done by his friend Filippo Marigli is revealing. Even then, in comparative youth, his charm was not dependent on mere physical beauty. He looks somewhat like an operatic tenor (among his accomplishments was a fine tenor voice), he is fat, and the open shirt collar *à la* Byron exposes a thick neck. His hair is very heavy and very curly; his eyes, dark, dramatic; but his

mouth is delicate and sensitive—a poet's mouth. The impression left is of a temperament so great that three-fourths of his talents have gone into its making, and of something soft, loose, sensuous, and generously impulsive.

Only in recent years has it become known that at Malta he had had what a biographer calls delicately "domestic responsibilities of an irregular kind." There was a mysterious Donna Peppina who followed the poet from Naples to Malta; and letters to his friend Ferretti speak often about her. In his worry about her bad health we detect a note of genuine affection and concern. He also reports the loss of a newborn son, "my perfect image in miniature." * Then Donna Peppina fades out in a foggy silence that comes from England. Did the Rossettis know of her existence? Perhaps his wife knew, and Dante Gabriel would not have minded. But one shudders to think of William Michael's delicate sense of social decorum so outraged, Maria Rossetti's intense religious revulsion, Christina's pained and silent forgiveness. How deep his religious affiliations were has also been a matter for speculation. If he was not a Catholic, he was a free-thinker in odd poetic moments; at his death he had begun to draw closer to religious emotion, but whether Roman Catholic or Anglo-Catholic it is difficult to tell. In 1823 we find him writing to the Neapolitan consul in Malta:

Signor Console

I have been informed by trustworthy persons that you have been going about spreading the report that I am an unfrocked priest. . . . I believe you would admit that there is little difference between a man who having had the glory of exercising the august ministry of our holy religion chooses to relinquish it, and one who having had the good fortune to be born in her bosom should choose to abjure her. . . . If then I fail to rebut your charges . . . I should volun-

* See *The Rossetti Family*, by R. D. Waller (Manchester Univ. Press, 1932), p. 119.

tarily assume the wretched character of an apostate. My offended honor requires satisfaction.

Again we do not know if the duel ever came off, or what happened; but this letter is a clue to Gabriele's rhetoric and temperament.

In 1824 after many hairbreadth adventures, and through the influence of some distinguished people in Malta, he escaped the persecutions of the Neapolitan government, which had found him too luridly revolutionary even for a Romantic poet. The friends who helped him to escape were English, and he found his way to England. Through them he received letters to important people. He even received a letter to Holland House, and he moved, not unobtrusively, but with charm and dignity, among the great in that famous mansion, meeting its statesmen, scholars, and literati, all of whom could be so useful to a stranded foreigner. Here he met Coleridge, who drew him into discussions of philosophy and Italian poetry. The great glowing eyes of Coleridge seemed like extinct craters smoldering with promises that he would have remembered if drugs and habitual forgetfulness had allowed him to remember. Coleridge, however, introduced Gabriele Rossetti to Henry Francis Cary, the translator of Dante.

Cary had done more than anyone else to make Dante admired in England. He had begun life as a protégé of that curious late eighteenth century incipient Romantic, Anna Seward, the Swan of Lichfield,* and had ended in years and honors in a post at the British Museum, and as a friend of the great Romantics of the early nineteenth century. Gone were the days when Horace Walpole could dismiss the *Divine Comedy* as "the ravings of a methodist parson in Bedlam"; but, in Walpole's truly

* It is not often remembered that she was one of the first admirers of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Southey. She would have discovered the early (and Romantic!) Walter Savage Landor, had he not warded off her praise.

eighteenth century standards of behavior, elegance and decorum, did not include "enthusiasm," which was especially vulgar in religious affairs.

Cary's elegant, decorous translation caught now and then a touch of the great Tuscan's fire, and his friends, the Romantic poets, helped him to spread the gospel of Dante. It was always pleasant to talk about Dante—he never lost touch with his favorite subject—and Gabriele Rossetti, eager, voluble, and charming, attracted him. Later he was very useful in finding pupils when Gabriele set himself up as a teacher of Italian. Cary thought his theories about Dante wild but interesting, which was an opinion shared by other English friends, who loved him none the less.

The literary man Gabriele found most courteous, delightful, and helpful was the poet Thomas Campbell—long much admired in England and America but now known only for a battle piece or two, including the famous "Hohenlinden"—who was also an editor of influence; and Gabriele, impressed by his experience in meeting so many pleasing, so many helpful people, poured out his gratitude to his patroness in Malta, Lady Moore. She was the wife of Rear Admiral Sir Graham Moore, commander in chief of the British Navy in the Mediterranean and a brother of that Sir John Moore whose picturesque funeral has gone down to posterity in the poem beginning "Not a drum was heard," surely one of the world's best declamation pieces, worthy to take its place with "Hohenlinden" and not with "Casabianca" or "Bingen on the Rhine" or "Marco Bozzaris"—or, one is almost tempted to add, Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!"—which are among the worst. One has a feeling that Gabriele Rossetti would have liked all these poems with sublime indiscrimination, for they were all in the latest "modern" style of the day. We must remember that when Whitman wrote "O Captain! My Captain!" early memories of his reading in Fitz-Greene

Halleck returned, and Halleck had written his immortal "Marco Bozzaris" with memories of Byron diluted with Campbell. So we can imagine Gabriele Rossetti full of meeting the great Lord Holland, friend and patron of poets, and mingling for a while with the select company of Holland House. And the poets he loved most wrote the kind of poetry he would have wished to write, if he had written poetry in English. It is no surprise to us that he preferred Campbell to Coleridge, for many distinguished people in the England of that day did the same.

He may well have rushed in ecstasy to his room in some modest lodging house in an Italian quarter of London (for all his life he kept close to his countrymen) and, taking pen in hand, written another eloquent epistle to Lady Moore. "Highly respected Mylady," for she had given him many letters of introduction. Again, he must write to his other valued friend and patron, John Hookham Frere, also residing in Malta, who had been so taken by Gabriele that he had admitted him to a life-long friendship. That friendship was indeed a mark of distinction, for Frere represented all that was cultivated, classical, urbane, and charming. He was, indeed, a last representative of the eighteenth century culture that was fast fading away, and that already seemed as remote and alien to the new generation as Victorian culture seems to us. Today his portrait by a second-rate painter in the National Gallery speaks of a living man, so aristocratic and handsome is the graceful, well poised head, so easy and friendly his manner, as he sits on a terrace contemplating the Mediterranean, with writing materials before him. He was a diplomat by profession, a classical translator by choice, and his translations from Aristophanes have not often been equaled after a hundred years. Though he was a good Tory, the fiery and "revolutionary" poet found a place in his heart, and Rossetti loved him above all his English friends. Many years later, difficult moments for the Rossetti family in London were

tided over by a draft for fifty pounds or a hundred, or a check that would enable Gabriele to publish his own books privately. When Gabriele was old and ill, his sight failing, he received news of Frere's death. He startled his family by falling on his knees and bursting into tears: "Anima bella, benedetta sii tu dovunque sei!"

4

Mrs. Gabriele Rossetti always rose at seven, and occasionally when there was a small gift from Mr. Frere or an unusual number of pupils who wished to learn Italian she would hire a servant to help her with the children or with the household details. When Gabriele Rossetti arrived home after teaching his classes in Italian at King's College, he effusively embraced his family and then turned with equal happiness to his desk where manuscripts had piled up in a confusion which he alone could reduce. There they were before him—his never finished and vast Dante studies, his unfinished poems, all intricate, dark and beautiful—to think about. It made the days of ill paid drudgery at King's College, the many evenings of tutoring after the college hours, seem irrelevant. This was his real world, from which he turned back with pride to his tall fair wife, the stocky, brilliant elder son, Dante Gabriel, handsome, sedate William, and the two little girls. Yes, he felt himself a happy man, and he expected remarkable things of the children, as he had always expected miracles and wonders in life. Maria, who even as a small child had a peculiar ugliness, a rather distinguished *spirituel* ugliness that made her look like a child in an Italian primitive painting, was very clever. In contrast, pretty, willful Christina was all delicacy, lightness, and grace, though she had not so firm and retentive a mind. Maria had a strong character, and a word from her to Christina was enough to correct any naughtiness. Maria had the intellect, William the worldly wisdom, and between

William and his mother the temperamental excesses of the Rossetti family seemed to be held in check. But the influence of Maria on Christina was very strange, almost indefinable. Sometimes Christina's thoughts were like butterflies caught in a fine intricate net of Maria's weaving.

But the quiet, forceful figure of Frances Lavinia, the mother, seemed to pervade the place. Even when there was much company, voluble Italian speech, passionate political discussion, the sound of voices pitched high in argument, her silent, calm beauty dominated a room where she sat observing much and saying little.

5

Frances Mary Lavinia Polidori, the mother of the Rossettis, looms over her children like a tall Roman monument. Her father, Gaetano Polidori, was born to the cultivated and superior society that Gabriele Rossetti attained through personality and talent. He too had literary gifts, but it was as an academician and a scholar that he was known in England and in his native country. In his youth he had had his moment of romance. He had been secretary to the great Count Alfieri, the most romantic figure in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century literature before the advent of Byron, but had been in England over thirty years teaching and writing when Rossetti met him. Polidori had married an English governess, Anna Maria Pearce, who seems to have been always in the background but who contributed the firm chin, the calm English reserve to her daughter Francesca and granddaughter Christina, and the cool hazel eyes. Hers, too, was the steady wise industriousness of her grandson, William Michael. We know that for many years she was a chronic invalid, and that she had a decidedly morbid and uncheerful temperament, a trait certainly inherited by Christina, and that she was noted for "faultless precision and faultless decorum"—

both qualities excellent in a governess, but not always delightful in the family circle. That faultless decorum was Christina's too and, touched with Italian fire and Anna Maria's English Protestant conscience, may have helped to set the tone of Christina's poetry, where two natures seem in conflict.

6

Gaetano Polidori, then living quietly in England, had had a full life. He liked to remember his colorful non-English past, traveling as companion-secretary with the poet Alfieri. On that memorable July in 1789 when the Bastille was stormed, they had been in Paris; and he remembered how Alfieri had joined the mobs and shouted for joy. He remembered Alfieri's mistress, the attractive German princess who as the wife of Bonnie Prince Charlie in his tragic, drunken later years had left him to join the poet-count in one of the great scandals of the century. But Count Alfieri was not one on whom to pin one's life and fortune. Gaetano, receiving letters of introduction to Dr. Samuel Johnson's, or rather Boswell's, General Paoli, who was then in England, decided to try his fortune in that country. Through Paoli he met others in England who helped him to establish himself as a teacher of Italian. The eighteenth century was still in its mellow afterglow when he arrived, and Italian was the language of love, of art, of a softer classical culture, the language of the grand tour. No one was a gentleman without it, no female truly elegant or accomplished without it. It was not long before Gaetano Polidori prospered and earned enough to retire with his four daughters and two sons to a pretty little house at Holmer Green near Little Missenden.

Another son, known to literary history as Dr. John Polidori, had been traveling physician to Lord Byron, who called him "a very extravagant, silly gentleman," perhaps for the same reason that he found Lady Caroline Lamb silly, disturbing, and, at last,

insupportable. Imitation is the severest criticism: nothing is so depressing and frightening as to see ourselves through the mirror of a perfect mimic. Dr. John Polidori and Lady Caroline were not people Byron could endure long—they resembled him too much! Young Dr. Polidori was the true Romantic of the period, and he had gone at once to the fountainhead of Romantic behavior to perfect his style. During this period of attendance he met Percy Bysshe Shelley on the memorable elopement with Mary Godwin and her sister Jane Clairmont when the curious trio joined Lord Byron in Switzerland. He disliked all three (he thought Percy Shelley incapable of telling the truth about anything—which was almost true), and he did what he could to see that Jane's romance with Byron did not run smoothly. As he visited the sacred shrines of Vevey and Clarens he read and re-read Rousseau and loved Lord Byron with a mad jealous love that was almost akin to hatred. He made vicious little comments about Mary Shelley's pretensions to gentility and learning, Jane Clairmont's vulgarity, and Shelley's perpetual, romantic fibbing.

By the time Dr. John's nephews and nieces grew up, Shelley's pious elderly and Victorian daughter-in-law—who was later to startle Alice Meynell by referring to that legendary rebel so long deceased, the young poet of air, of light, of clouds, of fire, as "my poor father"—had well fostered the picture of him as a plaster saint. But Dr. John belonged to the same "rebel" generation, Shelley was not *his* "poor dear father," and he did not hesitate to say that he found "the beautiful ineffectual angel" as unangelic as many of his contemporaries found him. After all, he, Polidori, was Byron's man; and, after Shelley, Byron seemed all that was manly, rational, straightforward.

Dr. Polidori might have made allowance for Shelley's poetic imagination, for he was himself something of a poet, something of an author. He had published a novel full of Gothic horrors, called *The Vampyre*, for the atmosphere around Byron seemed

to encourage books like *Frankenstein*, and *The Vampyre* out-frankensteined *Frankenstein*. Evidently he allowed it to be thought that the book was by Byron himself; and Byron put an end to the rumor in his most masculine and decisive language.* After this, Polidori left him, became involved in political and personal scrapes, and at last, exiled from his family and involved in gambling debts, he committed suicide.

And yet Byron was haunted by the man as if by a fatal double image. After all, Polidori was a man and not a woman, and Byron had never wronged *him*, had been generous, kind, and almost patient with him. He had no outward feeling of guilt about Polidori. But the guilt was there, deep and dark, unknown within him, for he dreamed of Polidori before starting on his fatal Greek journey:

I was convinced something very unpleasant hung over me last night. I expected to hear that somebody I knew was dead—so it turns out. Poor Polidori is dead.

Byron may well have felt a pang. For John Polidori died, as Peter Quennell has said, of Byronism.

The relative who said unflattering things about the divine Shelley, who recorded with a mixture of satire and admiration how Byron “had thrown himself like a thunderbolt upon the chambermaid” as soon as he arrived in his room at Ostend, was not one that delicate, refined spinster nieces could remember without a shudder. His name was never mentioned in the Rossetti or Polidori households—but his portrait hung in Christina’s house and was in the room where she died. What memories of sin, of unbridled passions, and suicide, that sin for which in her mind there was no expiation, flowed down from the wall?

* “Damn *The Vampyre*. What do I know of Vampyres? It must be some book-selling imposture; contradict it in a solemn paragraph.”—Lord Byron to the Honorable Douglas Kinnaird, Apr. 24, 1819.

What did John Polidori's pictured eyes say to his niece, this woman who, after a singularly blameless life, still felt on her deathbed that she had been a great sinner?

7

The Polidori boys had been brought up as Catholics, the girls in the Anglican Church. The four girls alone, however, seem to move out of the time-dimmed picture: Francesca, the mother of the Rossettis, and the three beloved maiden aunts, Margaret, Eliza, and Charlotte, all of whom except Eliza followed the family occupation of governess, that only occupation open to gentle, well educated, poorly dowered girls. The Governess, following her vocation of genteel servitude, a retiring phantom in the castles, manor houses, and mansions of the great and wealthy, is familiar to us in Victorian fiction, most familiar to us through the pages of the Brontës. But the Brontë girls were the least successful, the least characteristic of the Victorian governesses. It is rather as the gentle, self-effacing, practical, adaptable, and "accomplished" governess of less romantic Victorian novels that we see the Polidori sisters, including Frances or Francesca, the one sister who married.

Before her marriage to Gabriele Rossetti, she had been a governess in the house of a Sir Patrick Macgregor, and his brother, Colonel Macgregor, had fallen in love with her. His admiration was said to be "open and honorable," and here we have the image of a Trollope and not a Brontë heroine. Did she return the gallant Colonel's admiration? Or was a Polidori girl, however lovely and accomplished, no match for the brother of a baronet? We know that Francesca, though "uncreative" herself, admired "genius," that she read widely and had an affection for the arts that was simple, admiring, and almost domestic. Gabriele Rossetti, on visiting the Polidori household, had been enchanted by the beautiful breeding and womanly charm of

this second daughter, who stood out of the conversation piece of low-voiced governesses. The other girls somewhat resembled their English mother, whose Tory sentiments and Protestant zeal stiffened their backbones and restrained the warm, easy, Italian gestures.

Francesca,^{*} of all the girls, had listened with most interest to her father's stories of his youthful journeys with the great Count Alfieri. It was she that delighted most in his story of the day when he and the Count had danced for joy on the streets of Paris because the Bastille had fallen. Perhaps the faintest whisper, the very faintest whisper, reached her of the mysterious long-lost brother John, his gambling debts and his novels, his love and jealousy of Lord Byron. One of the spinster sisters, not Francesca, came upon the unspeakable journal that her brother had kept—and immediately effaced the remark about Lord Byron falling like a thunderbolt upon the chambermaid; but a young Rossetti also saw the journal, remembered the passage, and recorded it for posterity.

The Polidori boys were considered by their neighbors to be "cracked." Perhaps they resembled Byron's Dr. John; or perhaps their oddity was of a sort that leads not to romantic tragedy but to simple misery.

Gabriele Rossetti and Francesca Polidori were married on April 10, 1826. He was forty-three years old and she barely twenty-six. Did the memory of Colonel Macgregor make her feel that, if she could not marry for love, she would marry a man she could at least respect and admire, who had all the mannerisms of genius?

Whatever the circumstances surrounding this marriage, it was one of the happiest marriages on record, and their children

* In her husband's letters she is always Francesca, but as the Rossettis became more Anglicized the name became Frances.

did arise and called them blessed. Years later in a poem eulogizing his wife Gabriele wrote:

And you, beloved children thank you me,
That such a mother I chose to give you breath.
Others perhaps will say that every bird
(An ancient saw) approves his proper nest.
Maria, Christina, William, Gabriel,
My children, *you'll* reply and that's enough.

Among the two godmothers * of the youngest daughter, Christina, born December 5, 1830, was Miss Georgina Macgregor, a niece of that Colonel Macgregor who had brought a touch of romance to Francesca Rossetti's youth. It is also significant that in the year of Christina's birth, another little girl was born across the Atlantic to a family who would have thought the Rossettis a very odd family indeed. For these people were New Englanders of a correct and rigid type, and they were the parents of Emily Dickinson. Two of the most remarkable poets of their time, in spite of their several resemblances, passed their lives on different sides of the Atlantic only faintly conscious of each other. The showy, well publicized Muse of Elizabeth Barrett Browning was well known to Emily Dickinson; but of Christina Rossetti she made little if any mention. Perhaps in their singularity, their gift for solitude, their very individual gifts, these two women could not have appreciated each other. They too had too much in common. But we know that Christina Rossetti a few years before her death had read Emily Dickinson. On the 6th of December, 1890, she wrote to her brother William Michael:

* The other godmother was the Princess Christina Bonaparte, a niece of Napoleon, afterwards Lady Dudley Stuart, one of Gabriele's distinguished patrons.

There is a book too I might have shown you, if I had remembered: Poems by Emily Dickinson, lately sent me from America—but perhaps you know it. She *had* (for she is dead) a wonderfully Blakean gift, but therewithal a startling recklessness of poetic ways and means.*

There are some (now that the cult of Emily Dickinson, at least in America, has reached fantastic heights) willing to agree somewhat with Christina's well tempered appraisal. Christina was the more perfect artist because she had a wider technical range, and ultimately a wider emotional range. In contrast to Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti was an artist of classic firmness; and, since her orthodoxy was both profound and deep in poetic technique as well as in religion, she would have found Emily Dickinson irregular and unfinished. The same temperamental difference existed between Pope and Donne, or, to make another comparison, between a fine painting by Ralph Earle and a fine portrait by Gainsborough or Reynolds. To prefer one to the other might very well be a matter of temperament rather than of taste. Certainly, the English painters I have mentioned give one a feeling of a richer, warmer finish—and the finish of true art has become rare in modern poetry. We are the poorer for it.

8

Gabriele Rossetti never became a naturalized British subject, and as much Italian as English was spoken in his home. His son William Michael says that even in its best days the family income never exceeded £300 a year. But the harmony between Gabriele and his wife was complete, neither nagging nor quarrelling was ever heard by the children; an air of lofty, unworldly poetry entered the household and gave it its special distinction. Books, politics, poetry, philosophy were the main topics at the dinner

* *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, pp. 176–177.

table, and strange visitors from Italy, colorful, romantic, representing all ranks of society, filled the shabby, neatly kept drawing room. Francesca's training as a governess was put to good use, she herself taught the children, when they were young, almost everything except singing and dancing. About the last she may have felt religious scruples.

At the age of eleven, Maria was already exhibiting those gifts that would have made her an excellent and somewhat pedantic instructor in one of the better women's colleges—if they had then existed. She was deep in the study of the Iliad and the Odyssey, her mind was full of Greek and Roman mythology; and this classical training never left her, even when religious passion like a slowly devouring fever fixed all her learning into one burning interest. Both William Michael and Dante Gabriel exhibited literary gifts at an early age, and the atmosphere of the Rossetti household spread into other households when the Rossetti children had grown up and the Pre-Raphaelites came to represent all that was esoteric and fashionable in the arts. Young Ford Madox Hueffer * was to describe his artist grandfather's scorn and contempt for a youthful relative who had broken the frightful news to the old man that he felt that he had no true gift for the arts and wanted to go into business and make money! The very thought of a world beyond art, beyond poetry, had become alien and repugnant to the inheritors of the Rossetti-Polidori tradition, and in this lay the secret of their success and of their failure.

9

Looking at their children, Gabriele and Francesca Rossetti could not conceal their pride. Even those who thought Maria far from pretty could not deny a certain distinction of mind

* Afterward Ford Madox Ford; nephew of Mrs. William Michael Rossetti and grandson of Ford Madox Brown.

and manner that made her very attractive. Delicate, pretty little Christina, with her large hazel eyes, clear complexion, oval face, and thoughtful air, was both piquant and witty. At this time she displayed a cheerfulness amounting to gayety, that died, alas, too early in her life. She is described as "passionate, given to tantrums," full of childish mischief, and indifferent to her studies. Young Dante Gabriel was growing into a handsome stocky boy, and already exhibited the charm and magnetism that were to delight every circle in which he moved. William, handsome, quiet, very Italian in appearance, was almost too thoughtful for his years. Well might old Gabriele Rossetti looking on his brood exclaim in characteristic eloquence, "Princes, you have persecuted me in vain!" For in his children the genius that had been stifled by teaching, by uncongenial labor, by long exile from the sources of his native language, was to find its justification. He imagined his children as great poets, revolutionaries, champions of the oppressed, great painters, benefactors of humanity.

A lofty ideal of conduct was also taken for granted in the Rossetti household, and few English guests at the table forgot the experience. During a rare period of comparative prosperity when Christina was five years old, the family had moved to a larger house on the same street. The rent was £60 a year. The rooms were small and dark, but there were more of them. The old furniture was not replaced, but all was neatness and even had the charm that comes from comfort. A colored engraving of young Queen Victoria in her opera box, given to Mrs. Rossetti by one of her English aunts, occupied a place of honor in the drawing room. Its hanging had caused much excitement among the young Rossettis. Later, portraits of the children done by a not too distinguished painter, a fellow exile of old Gabriele, were to appear on the walls. But a visit to the Rossettis was not remembered for fine furniture or luxurious surroundings. The opulent imagination of the later Romantics and incipient Pre-

Raphaelites was in their speech and gestures, and in the atmosphere that the strange crowd of visitors brought to their house.

T. Earle Welby, in his study of Victorian Romanticism, has noticed that the early Swinburne and the other Pre-Raphaelites were part of a less isolated movement than they themselves thought, and were less exotic than they knew. And Gautier, a Frenchman and a Romantic of another kind, has described a typical interior, the sort of interior that the Pre-Raphaelites were to reproduce in their homes and studios when they became rich and famous, and the atmosphere was to enter their poetry and painting:

* The room is spacious and magnificent. Oaken wainscotings, enhanced with dead gold arabesques, ornate the walls; a preciously sculptured cornice, supported by cupids and fanciful figures, encircles the ceiling, which is traversed by beams ornamented and carved into female figures, against a gold background, in the Gothic style, but with a more supple and delicate hand. Between the windows are small stands and buffets of antique design, supported by silver dolphins with golden fins and eyes, and tails twisted into the most fantastic figures. These buffets are loaded with plate engraved with the family coat-of-arms, and oddly shaped flagons containing unknown liquors. Rich, heavy curtains of nacarat velvet, lined with white silk and edged with golden fringe, cover the stained-glass windows, which are provided with triple blinds, that prevent any exterior noise from penetrating within . . . An immense chimney-piece, also of sculptured wood, occupies one end of the room; two figures with painted breasts and undulating hips . . . replace the supports, carrying on their shoulders a . . . lintel, delicately worked and covered with leaves of exquisite finish. Above this, a beveled Venetian mirror, very narrow, and placed on end, glistens in its magnificent frame. An entire forest seems to blaze in the mouth of this vast chimney, which is lined with white marble, and two enormous bronze dragons with scaled wings do the service of ordi-

* Théophile Gautier, *Fortunio*, chap. i. Balzac's interiors were also famous and similar, and were carefully imitated from Balzac's books in "artistic" homes in nineteenth century Russia!

nary andirons. Three chandeliers of rock crystal, loaded with candles, hang from the ceiling like gigantic clusters . . . ; twelve sconces of gilded bronze, representing the nude arms of slaves, project from the wainscoting, each hand hiding a bunch of odd flowers from which the white jets of light flash like blazing pistils; and as a crowning magnificence, above the doors, four Titians of fabulous beauty, in all their passionate splendor, in all the opulence of their warm amber colorings—Venuses and royal favorites, proudly reclining in all their divine loveliness under the rosy shadows of the hangings . . .

This opulence has a richness and wildness that makes even the interiors of Edgar Allan Poe seem chaste, but the period concept of the beautiful is sometimes as well expressed in its interiors as in its art criticism. And this interior, so representative of that flowering of middle nineteenth century Romanticism, was in England to express itself in the poetry of Swinburne, the early paintings of Rossetti. In Christina Rossetti, though the element of the too rich, the too strange was also to appear, it became a little muted, a little restrained, as if a curtain of gray had fallen over the golden arabesques. The simplicity, the poverty of the Rossetti household, the drop of sober English blood had lent an imperceptible discipline; but even Christina Rossetti could not escape the full legacy of her blood, or the peculiar baroque opulence of her period, which was to penetrate even the effeminate sweetness of the young Tennyson. In a few of her poems are the Titian color and sweep of imagination; but in her prose the rich stream of Ovidian overdecoration breaks and rises in an unaccustomed, an Italian freedom.

10

As a child Christina Rossetti gave little sign of the religious intensity bordering on melancholia that was to overwhelm her in later life. At a very early age she was beginning to compose little verses far above the facile, literary expression achieved by

children in literary families—the earliest, at five, being a couplet about a little girl who never went to school without her gladiator. A little later she wrote a tale called “The Dervise”—all about the adventures of a hero named Hassan who went into a cave and found adventures which were considered less serious than funny by her family. But she went on with her writing and so did Dante Gabriel, and Maria, and so did old Gabriele Rossetti, who was now lost in some strange new interpretation of Dante with the central idea that if one could only find the key, the secret Word hidden in the Word, one would surely discover that the whole of the *Divine Comedy* was a tract against the Papacy.

Not only in Dante now, but in all his studies, the Secret Key lay hidden, waiting only to be found, and he astonished visiting scholars with his interpretations. The visitors were often amused, too, to hear old Gabriele in passionately tragic tones denounce the tyrants of Naples, the Pope and Metternich, and then burst into equally violent eulogies of Garibaldi and Louis Napoleon. Sighs, groans, appeals to heaven were heard from that old poet once described by Carducci as “the singer who notwithstanding his faults, conforms the most to the poetic taste and the harmonious faculty of the Italian people.” And while he argued and gesticulated the children played cards on the floor or continued reading in another corner of the room, and Mrs. Rossetti smiled faintly under her Madonna eyelids and went on with her sewing.

11

Sometimes Gabriele knew that a new generation in Italy thought less highly of him than the critics at the time when he had been the youthful revolutionary poet and *improvvisatore*. He trusted that Francesca had not really listened to the harsh criticism that was beginning to come in whenever he published a book. Were people in Italy beginning to forget him? But then there was always an admiring visitor to tell him that he was still

revered, still admired, and occasionally a clipping that spoke of him with the old esteem. This was pleasant, for he could show it to his Francesca and it enabled her to see her Poet as she had first seen him. In August, 1836, he wrote to her while she was away on a visit to her family:

A Marchesa Marchegiani paid three calls in two days. She talked for ten. She expressed great concern for your illness and exclaimed, "Oh if I had seen her I would have made her know what a husband she possesses." To hear her, I am the idol of Italy . . . were I to return, youthful admirers would come about me in shoals. . . . Sangiovanni, who was present at all this, had to wipe his eyes from time to time, the loving friend! In short, dear Francesca, without having observed it now, nor yet myself, you have a husband who is the greatest man in Italy.

There is something wistful and a little hesitant about this outburst of innocent vanity, somehow like whistling to keep his courage up, as if he were indeed the poet of whom an anonymous contributor to *Smallwood's Magazine* (an English magazine, it was true) had said that he possessed the "tenderness of Petrarch, the fancy of Ariosto, the classic colouring of Tasso," and said, too, that the great Manzoni was only his imitator.

Gabriele Rossetti always retained his gift of charming those who met him. A Mr. Temple Leader, a radical member of Parliament, was fond of his conversation and always invited him to dinner; and the descriptions of these wonderful dinners which he wrote to his family make one realize that sumptuous meals were not common in the Rossetti household. Mary Shelley sent him her essays on Italian literature for correction and advice, and Seymour Kirkup, who was present at the funerals of Keats and Shelley but is better known as the artist who found the Dante fresco in the Bargello, was a friend and admirer. Prince Pierre Bonaparte, brother of Lady Dudley Stuart, sent him souvenirs

of the great Napoleon, submitted his own literary efforts, and often invited Gabriele to dinner. When Gabriele Rossetti brought out some new poems in 1838, an enthusiastic young English admirer and student of Italian literature, twenty-two-year-old Caroline Ward, translated several of them into English. In the same year another pupil, a Mrs. Smythies, wrote a novel with an Italian setting called *Fitzherbert, or Lovers and Fortune Hunters*, in which the heroine recites Gabriele Rossetti's poems as she enters the Bay of Naples. Or, again, she invokes him looking out on the green-blue Italian waters:

Oh, not in vain have Pellico's blood-curdling narratives drawn tears of indignation from Italy, of pity from a shuddering world! not in vain have her sons won from other lands the laurel their own denied, not in vain Rossetti exiled (for the very love he bore his country) poured his torrents of inspired eloquence into the heart of the suffering people rousing the dormant feeling which shall wake like giants refreshed by slumber.

Another time in a drawing room, the heroine (very politically and poetically minded) arouses a select circle by her own original poem:

Ansonia shall be free! oh not in vain
Rossetti breathes his heaven-inspired strain;
Pindar of Italy.

In this atmosphere of literary discussion, in this modest home which was always filled with revolutionary-minded organ grinders, painters, princes, and noble and romantic ladies like Christina's godmother the Bonaparte princess, the four Rossetti children grew up observing much, and yet living in worlds of their own. The beautiful, calm mother bends over them in a too embracing tenderness, and old Gabriele looking with pride on his

attractive children, sees hope, although his eyesight is failing. This was beginning to affect his livelihood, and the prospect of a small payment for a poem, an article on Italian literature, an extra lecture on Dante, would be welcome—more welcome than he would admit. Francesca Rossetti had begun to think of resuming her old profession as a governess, and Maria already showed qualities of mind and temperament that made her parents feel that like Chaucer's Clerk, she too would gladly learn, and gladly teach. The same could almost be said of William Michael. For Dante Gabriel and Christina, brilliant and yet unstudious, charming, wild, petulant yet gentle, it was hard to prophesy the future.

Wearily holding his books closer as it became more difficult to read, Gabriele turned to unravel the Great Conspiracy that he saw with increasing clearness, Dante had hidden in the *Divine Comedy*. Did it not hold masked propaganda for the freemasons into whose mysteries he was initiate? Was not *The Pilgrim's Progress* such a book too? If only he could read English as well as Italian, he might prove that that book too held secret meanings. He had discovered secret meanings of great importance in Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*. In truth, though divided between hate and love for the Roman Church, he was never more of a Catholic than when he was abusing her, so much of frustrated love was in his cry. In 1833 he published a volume of devotional poems in Italian which was immediately placed on the Papal Index. This seemed to increase his persecution mania. Was he not a just, a pious man? Nor was he exactly a Protestant. But beside the good Catholic stood the ghost of the old Romantic poet, the man who had welcomed the French Revolution and the liberating Napoleon, who had stood at the bedside of the king of Naples and his mistress and wrested a constitution for his country from them. After all, the age of Rousseau, the age of Byron was closer to him than the age of St. Thomas

Aquinas. Teaching, and the necessity of providing for a growing family, had kept him from the world where only poetry mattered. But the suppressed music, the delicately muted ardors that he never achieved were to find exquisite expression in the two poets of his family. Poetry to him had been a source of sorrow and suffering as well as a fountain of purest pleasure. He might well have said with Chatterton or John Clare, "Damn the Muses, they are the parents of poverty and insanity." He had already made plans for his oldest son's career, that little boy who had surprised the milkman by sketching with so much seriousness and skill. In 1853 he encouraged him to be a painter:

Remember, my loved son, that you have your own ability upon which to thrive. Remember that you were born with a decided aptitude for painting, and that even from your earliest years you made us conceive the highest hopes that you would prove a great painter and such you will be I am assured.

Such faith can move mountains or frighten the most stout-hearted. It was evident that Gabriele expected his children to be artists, but rich, fortunate, and successful in a way that he had never been.



Lilies on the Stream: Childhood and Poetry

Sing; that in thy song I may
 Dream myself once more a child
In the green woods far away,
 Plucking clematis and wild
Hyacinths, till pleasure grew
 Tired, yet so was pleasure too,
Resting with no work to do.

In the thickest of the wood
 I remember long ago
How a stately oaktree stood
 With a sluggish pool below
Almost shadowed out of sight;
 On the waters dark as night
Water-lilies lay like light.

There, while yet a child, I thought
 I could live as in a dream;
Secret, neither found nor sought;
 Till the lilies on the stream,
Pure as virgin purity,
 Would seem scarce too pure for me:—
Ah but that can never be!

THIS fragment from one of Christina Rossetti's earlier poems, "Three Nuns," looks back on her childhood and the sources of

her poetry. In a lyric poet whose gift was so pure and apparently artless, the exercise of that talent begins almost with the first breath, and the images first seen with wonder and delight by a child of genius usually retain their force through life. The sight and scent of flowers—first the clematis and hyacinth, later the lily, the violet, and the rose—were to figure in her work always. They were flowers drawn from memory of some lost Paradise; and that Paradise was in the world of her childhood, which the purity and austerity of Christina's life kept intact. The world of childhood and the cool images of streams, of mysterious landscapes, of things of horror hidden under the mirrorlike beauty of the universe was reserved for her, and therefore for us, forever.

2

The Rossettis were not rich enough to take many vacations or excursions into the country. The children were city children, with the quick sensibility that intelligent children in a large city acquire. For Dante Gabriel and Christina, with the unfamiliar awe of the city child, Nature had mystical and secret meanings. To them Nature was always remote and strange; they were rather shy in her presence, and their landscapes are like scenes beheld only in tranced daydreams. Some of the tranced quality enters the landscapes of another poet, Blake, who also saw unearthly flowers and streams as he walked the streets of London. It was perhaps this secret, unacknowledged affinity that afterwards made Dante Gabriel so enthusiastic in his rediscovery of Blake.

Grandfather Polidori had retired to his little house at Holmer Green in Buckinghamshire, and there the Rossetti children were frequently taken for short visits when very young. The excitement of the trips was never forgotten by Christina. It was like entering an everlasting summer, green and glowing. To explore

the neighboring woods, to wander in the garden, was always a delight. If her grandfather was not at home, two of the maiden aunts were always there to entertain the children. Christina's exquisite diction in later life, her courtesy and grace of manner, were noticed by all who met her. Michael Rossetti attributes these qualities not only to the example of their mother, but to the Polidori aunts who had gone out as governesses in great houses. Aunt Charlotte was now a companion to the Dowager Marchioness of Bath and was staying with her among the beauties and splendors of "sacred Longleat," the great house that Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, had celebrated in a lovely poem a century before. Through Aunt Charlotte the doors and parks of Longleat were to open to the Rossetti nephews and nieces; and there, too, were formed the dream interiors and imagery of many a poem and picture. For Victorian Longleat was still Elizabethan in its beauty, and the deep green deer parks, fine picture galleries, splendid formal gardens were always there to color imagination and reflection. Aunt Charlotte wrote poetry too—very mournful poetry that reminded one of the tender reveries of Felicia Hemans. One cannot quite discover what sadness made up the lives of these quiet Polidori sisters, ideal governesses of the Victorian age, who live for us only in the bright aura of their Rossetti nephews and nieces. Pallid, gentle, dignified shadows, they hover around the Rossetti children, teaching them, loving them, shedding a sad, solitary, and somewhat obscure beauty in their lives.

The Polidori house at Holmer Green may not have been an earthly paradise like Longleat, but it was charming to city children. After London, the country seemed full of green freedom, and the sounds were very loud and strange. There was the little garden full of color and the heavy fruit trees that seemed rooted both in earth and sky; and there was the small pond at one corner of the garden—a rather sluggish and heavy pond where,

if one threw a pebble, a frog would be sure to jump up and disappear as if it had arisen from a green abyss. Christina always remembered that once a frog that she had frightened in this way had placed two hands on its head and moved away with a touching and too human air. Another time she had found a dead mouse in the orchard and, moved by sympathy, had buried him. Morbidity and curiosity stirred her, and she returned to the spot and began uncovering the mound. A large black insect emerged, terrifying, as if the mouse had taken a lighter, less pitiful, more terrible form. "I fled in horror and for long years ensuing, I never mentioned this ghastly adventure to anyone," she wrote afterwards.

But this episode sank deep in her mind and made a melancholy music in her verse. "The mystery of life, the mystery of death I see," she wrote in after years; and no poet has sought with keener, more desperate will to pierce these secrets. From similar small but "ghastly adventures" other thoughts, other images would arise, "Eternity still rolling in its car, Eternity still here and still to come."

The Polidori library also was a source of pleasure, and all the Rossetti children made good use of it. Not that the library at home was a bad one—we have noticed the family was a bookish one, and little luxuries and some necessities were given up to build the library that Gabriele Rossetti found more and more of a solace; but Grandfather Polidori had a real love both for the Romantic literature of his youth and for the occult, and in his library the children eagerly devoured Sir Walter Scott's novels, Allan Cunningham's tales, "Monk" Lewis's Gothic horrors, Maturin's *Melmoth, the Wanderer*, and *Sidonia, the Sorceress*, a well known German horror tale of the period, translated into English by the mother of Oscar Wilde. The last story was to haunt Dante Gabriel Rossetti for years and inspire one of his paintings named after the heroine of the book.

3

Christina Rossetti's official career as a poet started at the age of eleven with a birthday poem for her mother. These verses are remarkable only for their fluent smoothness. Already her devotion to her mother was of a passionate, clinging intensity. All through her life (and we can see this in the mother-and-daughter portraits that Dante Gabriel painted of them and in the remarkable photographs taken of them later by Lewis Carroll) Christina moved in her mother's orbit like a silver moon that is overwhelmed by the sun. These poems on her mother's birthday were continued for the rest of her mother's life by Christina, and though tenderness, warmth and loving humility are in them all, they are not among Christina's best or even her good poems. Perhaps before an emotion so consuming, personal, and direct even poetry failed. Her mother was very proud of the first birthday poem of her little daughter and wrote under the manuscript in her fine, firm governesslike hand:

"These lines are truly and literally by my little daughter who scrupulously rejected all assistance in her rhyming efforts under the impression that in this case they would not be her own."

At the age of nine Christina had run across an old miscellany that contained extracts from Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and the poem made a lasting appeal. It became one of the favorite poems of the Pre-Raphaelites, and they were never tired of illustrating and painting it. In its Romantic coloring, its youthful ardor, its glowing detail, the poem was made for them, and Pre-Raphaelitism, though never completely rooted in Christina Rossetti, had its part in her poetry too.

She also discovered Shakespeare; and since each generation discovers a Shakespeare in its own image the Shakespeare of Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti took on strange exotic

colors and new meanings. It was about this time, or a little earlier, that a Filippo Pistrucci, a painter and a teacher of Italian, painted the Rossetti children. Pistrucci was a fellow exile and a close friend of Gabriele Rossetti, who, since he was usually in financial difficulties, delicately commissioned him to paint the children one by one. The portrait of the little girl, Christina, still exists; it is not a work of art but the face is extraordinary. The forehead seems lofty and almost too intellectual for feminine beauty, but the great serious eyes and the smooth, cropped dark hair give distinction, if not beauty, to the face.

Maria's health was never very good; already she was beginning to exhibit signs of that nervous malady that was to stay with her all her self-sacrificing, intense, and inward-looking life. In appearance she was beginning to resemble portraits of Savonarola, who was a great man, but certainly did not have a beautiful face. In fact, Maria resembled, in spite of Dante Gabriel's later claims for a more aristocratic origin, the high-strung, archaic, deeply religious, intelligent peasant women from whose stock she had sprung. Christina was more graceful, more winning, given to the jokes and puns that pass for humor in a literary household. Already her health was subject to greater disturbances than that of the others; mysterious maladies half nervous in their origins came to her with more frequency, and would disappear as suddenly as they came. Grandfather Polidori ran a small printing press as a hobby. This he kept in a shed in his London garden, and nothing delighted the children so much as to see their grandfather with the aid of a Sicilian compositor setting up some of their own literary efforts. In 1847 he published a small book of verses by Christina which is now one of the most valuable of collector's items. The sixty-six pages contain many verses written between the ages of eleven and sixteen. Such poems as "Earth and Heaven" written at the age of fourteen show Christina's almost unconscious mastery of liquid metres:

Water calmly flowing,
 Sunlight deeply glowing,
 Swans some river riding
 That is gently gliding
 By the fresh green rushes,
 The sweet rose that blushes,
 Hyacinths whose dower
 Is both scent and flower,
 Skylark's soaring motion,
 Sunrise from the ocean
 Jewels that lie sparkling
 'Neath the waters darkling,
 Seaweed, coral, amber
 Flowers that climb and clamber.

Or we may take the following lines from a more cheerful than usual poem written to her Grandfather Polidori when she was fifteen:

The apple-tree is showing
 Its blossom of bright red,
 With a soft colour glowing
 Upon its leafy bed.

The pear-tree's pure white blossom
 Like stainless snow is seen;
 And all earth's genial bosom
 Is clothed with varied green.

The fragrant may is blooming,
 The yellow cowslip blows;
 Among its leaves entombing
 Peeps forth the pale primrose.

The king-cup flowers and daisies
 Are opening hard by;
 And many another raises
 Its head to please and die.

I love the gay wild flowers
Waving in fresh Spring air:—
Give me uncultured bowers,
Before the bright parterre.

Many of the verses printed on her grandfather's press, with their proud superscription "Privately printed at G Polidori's No. 15 Park Village East, Regent's Park London 1847," are already mature in their essential rhythms. The rare copy in the British Museum is made rarer because of the decorations in faint water colors by Christina herself to illustrate her poems. The verses written in her early teens are curious and interesting, not only for their remarkable facility but for the undeniable talent they exhibit. In later years her gifts grew richer, her craftsmanship more sure, more subtle; but here appear her ever recurrent themes, love, death, nature, and religion—the first sources of all lyric poetry. Also evident are the keen, fine, sensory impressions so valuable to a true lyric poet. One may take these excerpts from the poem "Summer" written at the age of fifteen to see how her later style takes form in her earliest manner. Her delight in flowers mingles with a soft melancholy, and the warm pictorial note is Italian, graceful, almost Petrarchian.

See in the south a radiant form,
Her fair head crowned with roses;
From her bright footpath flies the storm;
Upon her breast repose
Many an unconfined tress,
Golden, glossy, motionless.
Face and form are love and light,
Soft ineffably, yet bright.
All her path is strewn with flowers;
Round her float the laughing Hours
Heaven and Earth make joyful din,
Welcoming sweet Summer in.

Twine red roses round her hands;
Round her feet twine myrtle bands.
Heap up flowers, higher, higher;—
Tulips like a glowing fire,
Clematis of milky whiteness,
Sweet geraniums' varied brightness,
Honeysuckle, commeline,
Roses, myrtles, jessamine;
Heap them higher, bloom on bloom,
Bury her as in a tomb.

4

The Rossetti children were carefully brought up in the tenets of the Church of England. The girls, completely under the dominance of their adored mother, learned to take their religious duties seriously and, indeed, with something more than seriousness. In childhood they attended Holy Trinity Church in Marylebone. Later Mrs. Rossetti chose Christ Church in Albany Street so that she could meet her sisters, the church being near Park Village East where the Polidori family moved after giving up their country cottage. The incumbent, Dr. Dodsworth, was strongly influenced by the Oxford Movement, and when he entered the Roman Church he distressed the Polidori and Rossetti women greatly. But Mrs. Rossetti was assiduous in her devotion, and the strict rules and authoritative teaching of High Church ritual and practice were not uncongenial to her. One likes to imagine the young Christina at church, dreaming, absent, the beautiful language of the Book of Common Prayer deeply sinking into her memory. She was truly Italian in her deference to her father and later to her brothers as heads of the family. Their aloofness from the religious practices of her mother, aunts, and sister are never mentioned; perhaps, like true Latins, the Rossetti women may have felt that a little impiety, as well as a little gallantry, was natural enough to men but decidedly to be abhorred in women.

The atmosphere at home was darkening, now in an almost symbolic sense. Old Gabriele's declining health and failing eyesight stirred panic at the heart of the family circle. As fear fell upon him he drew his children closer, exhorting them, trying to plan their futures, pitting his optimism against impending disaster. His concern for Dante Gabriel, his beloved eldest son, was especially fervent. Dante Gabriel, whose gifts were so certain, must never deviate from that great future. Dante Gabriel was lazy; only his extraordinary charm, growing more extraordinary every day, saved him at school. In a fit of unwonted harshness Gabriele Rossetti would warn, rebuke, scold the boy, exhorting him to greater efforts. The few harsh words sank in deeply, so rare and unusual were they in this close-knit household, and years later, when Dante Gabriel had fulfilled his father's ambitions for him—or almost all—he was to remember them on his own deathbed with sadness and remorse—though he could not quite remember what his errors had been.

A good physician (preferably the best that could be found in London) was also considered as a family necessity, even at the cost of economy in other things. Some of the most famous medical men of the day became known to Christina, and her experiences with doctors were almost as extensive as her later friendships with clergymen. To this overcareful doctoring and her chronic ill health may be traced the touch of hypochondria that is so pervasive in her early poems and letters.

Dr. Charles Hare, who attended Christina when she was fifteen, left notes on her that have been preserved. He describes her as pale, slight, dark-eyed, anemic. He is impressed by her passionate devotion and dependence on her mother. He thinks Christina sweet and interesting—not beautiful. But he too is overwhelmed by Mrs. Rossetti, her strength, her fine manner, her charm, her beauty.

Dr. Hare attended Christina for five years. At that time she

was a chronic sufferer from bronchial and pulmonary trouble and believed herself to be dying of consumption, that favorite disease of the Romantic literary lady. Something had affected her health in adolescence, thought Dr. Hare, and had changed a lively, rosy little girl into this pale young creature. Perhaps if he had been a better psychologist he might have taken into consideration the nature of Christina's gifts, the gloom and poverty that were beginning to affect the household atmosphere, her sharp sensibilities, her premature creative activities, and the high-strung temperament, so susceptible to shock, sorrow, sensation. The family life so closely knit, her admiration for her sister Maria's gifts, which she thought greater than her own, her few friendships out of the home circle, made her unnaturally shy and ingrown. Only half conscious of her own gifts and attractions, she did not know that her "wistful ascetic face" that Dante Gabriel had painted as the shy troubled little white virgin in "*Ecce Ancilla Domini*" was being noticed by the clever and talkative young men he was luring up to his room on the third floor to discuss art and literature.

One of these young men, an artist whom Fame avoided,^{*} knew Christina well in her teens and did not think her beautiful in the conventional Victorian way; but he found her interesting and appealing. He noticed her gentle melancholy and thought it was due to the delicacy of her health. The early Victorian ideal of beauty was not of the spiritual Pre-Raphaelite order. We forget that the type became characteristic of an ideal of beauty only when Dante Gabriel had created it. With Christina as his first model he saw a face he loved, and with her he fixed the first Pre-Raphaelite type, brooding, pale, pure, exquisite, childish, grave-eyed. The type once fixed, the public accepted it as a standard of beauty. The air of waiting, of waiting for something remarkable, something wonderful, a miracle that would open

* The painter John R. Clayton, who knew her well about 1849-1851.

the world and reveal the heavens, was characteristic of the young Christina, and Dante Gabriel has immortalized her young, troubled gaze, sick with adolescence, overwhelmed with poetry. Dr. Hare had also noticed that, slight and frail as she was at fifteen, she was physically mature for her age. The miracle that she awaited was perhaps the miracle of falling in love. She was not quite eighteen when the miracle happened. Love came disguised as one of the many promising young artists who gathered around her brother. Christina well described that moment of shock, of recognition, of expectancy in her poem "A Pause":

At length there came the step upon the stair,
Upon the lock the old familiar hand.
Then first my spirit seemed to scent the air
Of Paradise; then first the tardy sand
Of time ran golden; and I felt my hair
Put on a glory, and my soul expand.

This first love came at the moment when a sheltered young girl was most ready to welcome love and yet was only half aware of its meanings. Some of the reading in her grandfather's library entered into her daydreams and became confused with the smoky London streets where every day she walked out, modestly and shabbily dressed, her eyes and mind intent on other scenes, other worlds. Her poetry now was full of visionary landscapes, of beautiful and sexless figures half angels, half demons, and of lovers who always died young. The mystery, the delightful dread that she had found in the horror tales of Maturin, Allan Cunningham, and "Monk" Lewis began to blend with dreams of love shadowed by death. These fears and shadows began to clear, began to dissolve as the Lover approached; and the release brought a clarity of vision into her horizon, and into her poetry.

5

When Christina Rossetti was about fifteen or sixteen she had a dream that she wanted Dante Gabriel to make into a picture for her. In the dream she was visiting Regent's Park at dawn, a cold dawn of early spring, when the sun fell in a pure, cold light, shivering into a rose cloudiness tinged with softest gray. Then through the chill sun and through the green, blurred, naked trees, she saw a wave of yellow light sweep down from the air. It was a multitude of canaries, thousands and thousands of them, all the canaries in London who had escaped from their cages and had congregated in Regent's Park in the half-awakened trees, for their moment of freedom. The moment of freedom and ecstasy made a vibrant light stream from their small golden bodies, as they huddled together. But they had had their brief hour, and now she knew that they were returning (and willingly!) into their captivity.

The door of the house in Charlotte Street opened into the rooms illumined by her mother's love, her brothers' stimulating conversation. Unreasonable happiness seemed to flow down upon her while she read, her mother sewed, Maria cast up accounts, and her father pored over manuscripts with his dimming eyes. She, too, knew that she was waiting for the voice that was to come out of the sky and shatter the trancelike quiet of her life. Like the Birds of Paradise, which were to figure in one of her best poems, a wave of suspended melody seemed to lift her out of her chronic melancholy and to bring color into her pale face. The Birds of Paradise in her poem were perhaps inspired by the dream about the liberated canaries hovering in the deserted treetops of Regent's Park. Like them she was to have her moment of liberation through love, and like them she was to return patiently into her familiar and loved cage. But in that never-forgotten moment of joy and liberation, she too had

been a Bird of Paradise, or at least an uncaged canary, she too had had her moment of emotional liberation.

Golden-winged, silver-winged,
Winged with flashing flame,
Such a flight of birds I saw,
Birds without a name:
Singing songs in their own tongue—
Songs of songs—they came.

.

On wings of flame they went and came
With a cadenced clang:
Their silver wings tinkled,
Their golden wings rang;
The wind it whistled through their wings
Where in heaven they sang.

.

Where the moon riseth not
Nor sun seeks the west,
There to sing their glory
Which they sing at rest,
There to sing their love-song
When they sing their best.



Youth, Poetry, and John Collinson

ONE winter evening in the year 1847, a young poet who was also interested in painting paid an excited call on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who had become the leader of a group interested, like himself, in poetry and painting. The young man, whose name was William Bell Scott, had published in a magazine a poem that Rossetti liked, and he had written asking him to call. Praise from one's own promising contemporaries is always sweet to a young poet. It is as if they are creating the future together, and are inventing a language that will be immortal some day but now is their own great secret, and it is as if every day, every hour is sacred to it. This was to be one of the memorable moments in Scott's life, and he left a record of it. His first impression is of special interest, because it is evocative, and the past comes up to us as if struggling through a dim light.

Entering the small front parlor which also served as a dining room, Scott was asked to wait for Dante Gabriel, who was in his upstairs room. Meanwhile Gabriele greeted him cordially and with interest, as he did all his son's friends. The old gentleman was sitting by the fire in a great chair with a thick manuscript book and the largest snuffbox the caller had ever seen. By the window was a high, narrow reading desk at which a slight graceful girl of about seventeen stood writing. Her serious regular profile seemed dark in the wintry light from the window. To Scott she was the more interesting of the two inmates in the room, and no doubt he hoped that she would talk to him; but

she only turned at his entrance, made a most formal and graceful curtsy, and returned to her writing. Soon Dante Gabriel came down, introduced him to his father and sister Christina, and took him upstairs to his own room.

Christina was now writing whenever she could spare time from her household duties, sometimes at the tall desk in the sitting room, or on the washstand in her bedroom. Her poems flowed from a spirit as simple and mournfully sweet as an April wind—poems about deserted brides and waiting bridegrooms, about the sweetness of death and the beauty of roses; but underneath all ran a remarkable, an un-English, slightly exotic and complicated music.

The stream moaneth as it floweth,
The wind sigheth as it bloweth,
Leaves are falling, Autumn goeth,
 Winter cometh back again;
And the air is very chilly,
And the country rough and hilly,
 And I shiver in the rain.
Who will help me? who will love me?

2

It was about this time, too, that the ladies of the Rossetti family noted a young man of twenty-three or -four whose regular and devout attentiveness at Christ Church, Albany Street, was very edifying. His absorption in religious meditation appeared profound and sincere, his earnestness as great as their own. He does not seem to have been handsome, and the descriptions of him are not alluring; but we must remember that the Rossettis were snobbish about him later, and that William Michael with his deep love of his sister and his great family pride, so Italian in its passion, came to despise and dislike the man who caused her unhappiness. His face, we are told, was in-

telligent enough, but he was small, dumpy, fair, and talked with a provincial accent. The Rossettis (except old Gabriele) spoke English with too much perfection, like many cultivated foreigners who have a feeling for language.

The edified ladies of Charlotte Street had been missing the young man at church when one day Dante Gabriel brought him to the house and introduced him as John Collinson, a fellow painter, who had been a pupil of their acquaintance Holman Hunt. Collinson explained his absence from Christ Church: Like so many earnest and soul-searching young men of the period, he had fallen under the influence of the Tractarian Movement, which had its emissaries in many London churches. Once he had started brooding over church doctrine and the welfare of his soul, he had felt that he had not gone far enough in accepting even the most ritualistic features of the Church of England. He had then fallen under the influence of Cardinal Wiseman and was now a Roman Catholic.

This was the sort of conversation the Rossetti ladies most delighted in, and we can imagine their courteous but firm disagreement, the gentle shaking of their heads. Collinson's father, a bookseller in Mansfield, had died and left him in fairly prosperous circumstances. In fact, with the exception of John Everett Millais (who was lucky in everything), he was the most prosperous of the group of budding artists and writers around Dante Gabriel. He was good-natured, too, and always ready with a loan to a fellow artist—a form of generosity that did not make him unpopular, and that made Dante Gabriel (whose critical judgment was often influenced by his private feelings) think very highly of him as a painter. Collinson talked with good sense, but was not at his best in conversation; he was shy, introverted and had no small talk. He sometimes laughed in a lachrymose manner, but this may have been due to some inner conflict or shyness. The characteristic that seems most to have impressed

his contemporaries was a habitual sleepiness; he would fall asleep at the most unaccountable moments, and an air of drowsiness entered his conversation, gestures, even his paintings. Holman Hunt, who had been his teacher, said that somnolence entered into Collinson's drawings too, his "Laocoön," his "Dancing Fawn," his "The Wrestlers." All seemed to belong to one sleepy family. But there was something in his face and manner and personality that attracted. Christina loved him, and for a time the Rossetti brothers were very fond of him and thought highly of his gifts as a painter. Later, Dante Gabriel would shrug his shoulders when Collinson's name was mentioned, and William Michael, with the hidalgo-like courtesy that seemed to cover an inner bitterness, would say that he had never seen anything in him and would record the fact that Collinson's career came to nothing with something like satisfaction—if one so noble, so evenly tempered, could feel satisfaction in the failure of another. In his eyes Collinson's crime was that he had caused Christina much suffering, suffering that changed her life and endangered her health, an unhappiness that took the form of a lifelong melancholia and perhaps set the pattern for future affairs of the heart.

The fruitless thought of what I might have been,
Haunting me ever, will not let me rest.
A cold North wind has withered all my green,
My sun is in the West.

But the image of the declining sun had haunted her verses even before she met Collinson.

It was true, as William Michael asserted with annoyance, that in beauty, breeding, talent Christina was too good for this dull young man; but there must have been in him some charm, some unworldly quality that appealed to her, and when she fell in love

again many years later, it was with one who shared some of Collinson's awkward drawing-room manners, and oddities. There was another cause for friction. He came from a dull middle-class family, Victorian in the most rigid sense, to whom the Rossettis seemed neither glamorous nor eligible. They were foreign, strange, poor. They were—the Collinsons must have whispered the word under their breaths, the word which to the smug and unimaginative always carries a suggestion of fire and brimstone—*eccentric*.

The Collinsons dismissed Christina's beauty, gentle, withdrawn, brooding. She was merely an odd-looking girl who would do for the strange pictures their son and his friends were painting; but like all pictures, all art, her beauty was not for every day. It was—they would have said if they had been articulate on such matters—*unreal*.

But in 1848 Dante Gabriel had praised Collinson's painting "The Charity Boy's Début," and the suave Millais, who even in earliest youth was as careful with his praise as with his money, had thought highly of that now, alas! unknown-to-the-world picture. Under the influence of Christina and Dante Gabriel, Collinson also began to write poetry, poems about the Infant Jesus, and The Seven Sorrowful Mysteries; and he was planning a picture to illustrate the life of that most congenial of Pre-Raphaelite saints, the royal Elizabeth of Hungary, dying so young and so piously, who had been brought from the splendors of the Hungarian court as an infant in a golden cradle to meet her equally youthful and princely husband in the moody Thuringian forests. The Miracle of the Roses and Lilies that will always recall her name, her death after years of asceticism and self-inflicted privations to the accompaniment of visionary bird music, endeared her to the Pre-Raphaelites and made her a fit subject for Collinson's religious and poetic fancies. It gained Christina's full-hearted enthusiasm and support, and she wrote

a St. Elizabeth poem as if to encourage Collinson in a dream of future partnership when they would share poetry and life together.

Later, when Dante Gabriel and William Michael no longer thought of Collinson as a "stunner," Christina would inquire anxiously of her brothers as to the fate of the St. Elizabeth picture, suggesting a change here, wondering if an improvement could not be made there. But Collinson never finished anything; the characteristic sleepiness suggesting some disturbance of the glands or the soul crept in upon him. We hear of him again painting the genre picture, so dear to the wealthy manufacturing class of the day, who were the new art patrons and liked a picture to tell a story that made them weep or smile or taught them a lesson.

Holman Hunt, who lived in the same boarding house with Collinson, found him painting a picture called "Relieving a Poor Family." Christina approved of the theme, but he took a more abstract view and felt that artistically the picture had little hope of success. He also noticed that Collinson painted with the hopeless despondency of one who despairs before he begins. In today's plain English, he suffered from an "inferiority complex"; but this shrinking sadness and spiritual awareness of psychic disability would only have endeared him to Christina who seemed guided in her love affairs by a strong maternal instinct. She too had begun to shrink from the world with its complicated and mysterious terrors.

The formless terrors of the Victorian age—with its grandeurs and miseries, its air of complacency and brute power, its frantic efforts to bolster a religious faith that was fast melting away before the encroachments of science—had reached even Christina's virginal and pious seclusion. This secret stream of pyschic distress that seemed to flow imperceptibly through every soul only made Collinson decide and Christina determine to stand

firm where all foundations appeared to float away. All around them lip-service was given to God and "morality"; but, listening very closely, one also heard the small fearful voice that said that God had left the world forever. Christina, although she shrank from the world, retained an inner strength; she was one of the happy few, God's elect, for was she not, as W. H. Auden has said, one of those "who are befriended by a gift"? Confident of her gift, she was poised and sure within; if she shrank into the shadows it was to gain renewal and strength for exercising that gift.

3

Holman Hunt, that wise and most sociable of painters, watched Collinson closely as his teacher and as a friend, and saw that he not only looked melancholy at breakfast, but appeared to have kept himself awake half the night in fruitless meditation. Was it on Art? love? religion? The first and last themes, however, seemed to be his only subjects of conversation. The spirit of devotion had spread from Oxford, from the movement that began with Pusey, Keble, Faber, Froude and ended not in the desired spiritual purification and reestablishment of the Church of England but in an exodus of young men into the Church of Rome. Collinson was one of the young men. As we have seen, he had been converted to Roman Catholicism by Cardinal Wiseman; and he held his religious convictions with the same fervor, the same heavy seriousness as many a young literary man in the 1930's who entered the membership of the Communist party. Yet the power of religious conviction carries deeper, darker subterranean roots to those who are capable of feeling its attraction, and he may have thought that his love for Christina Rossetti and his religious beliefs and his ambitions as an artist met in a bitter and unresolved war. For a more skeptical age, the fervors of the young man who felt the power of the Tractarians may be

difficult to understand. But an age like ours that has been subject to darker, bloodier, and more terrible fanaticisms should not find this young man's unswerving adherence to his deepest convictions so strange. The power of the Tractarian Movement is easier to understand if we accept Geoffrey Faber's explanation of its undefined but earnestly sought goal. Faber says that the Tractarians were determined to have something which many of us have accustomed ourselves to do without—certainty upon the terms and purpose of their earthly apprenticeship. But to Christina, as to Collinson, the road to salvation stretched long and clear. Hell stood at the left hand and Heaven at the right, and the road had no deviation or turning. Collinson was a Roman Catholic, and she an Anglican, their two roads led to entirely different countries—never could they meet in this world or the next. Their two faiths made marriage an impossibility.

Torn by doubts, harried by love, Collinson awoke from his devotions; he consulted Catholic and Anglican authorities, he consulted his heart, he consulted his love for Christina—while the Rossetti family stood coldly by. At last he made his choice: he would renounce the Roman Church, become an Anglican, and marry Christina. With his engagement openly acknowledged, all was gladness and peace of mind. He could now return to his painting, especially to the painting of St. Elizabeth of Hungary that Christina so much admired. The picture seems to have disappeared, as so much of Collinson has disappeared; but the Pre-Raphaelite brethren watched its progress at first with sympathy, and then (one is afraid) with something that resembled malice. Holman Hunt describes the picture as representing St. Elizabeth found by a band of courtiers as she is kneeling in the Cathedral at the foot of the Cross: "It was a neat and at the same time a timid effort, the would-be-Pre-Raphaelitism of which was the fact that he had painted the interior from

a brand-new church in London with Minton tiles for the pavement."

Collinson's struggles, vague and ineffectual as they were, ought to have aroused pity rather than laughter; but the world is cruel to the weak, and among artists the saddest penalty of failure is loneliness. Christina pitied him and sympathized with his spiritual confusions; she believed in his talent when her brother and his friends played practical jokes on him. No doubt he was as talented as many other minor painters, now forgotten, who sat at the feet of Dante Gabriel; and he may have been as talented as many a now forgotten but then well thought-of academician. But he lacked two gifts so necessary for the successful mediocrity: a firm self-confidence, and the gift for publicizing himself. His humility inspired contempt, and his friends were only too willing to take him at his own word.

Collinson was also writing poetry, mainly on devotional themes, and Christina always thought well of it—especially his poem on the Seven Sorrowful Mysteries, which later, when it appeared in *The Germ*, brought him many letters of admiration from Oxford, but is described by one of Christina's latest biographers as "a dreary, blank verse excursion of inordinate length." All was drawn out, all was weariness with poor Collinson. No amount of sympathy from his fiancée could soothe his strange and troubled soul. He was beginning to wander again in the faith, to doubt whether the church of the *Via Media* with all its beauty, with all its modulated ritual, was the church for him. He needed something richer, warmer, more certain, a more absolute authority. Had he been justified in giving up the Roman Church because of his love for Christina? In a greater, a stronger, a more brilliant man, the conflict would have had some touch of pathos or dignity; but in Collinson it awoke irritation, contempt, or humor in all but Christina. She was not one to laugh at a man because he was obsessed with God. But the hazel eyes assumed

that cold, piercing, unearthly look that we see in her later portraits. If he became a Roman Catholic again, all thoughts of marriage would become impossible. Not that she was fanatically opposed to the Church of Rome. It had its place, it was a branch of the true vine; but it was, in her eyes, only a *branch* of the true vine. She felt that she knew where the path of *her* salvation stretched, and where God's voice could reach her.

It was noticed that she rarely, in her God-haunted life, sought to convert others. It was enough that *she* had found the truth, and if she were to persuade others it would be through example, through fierce and silent prayers for those who could not see the light so clearly revealed. Walter de la Mare has noticed that, in all her devotional prose and poetry, she never asks "Are you saved?" but "Am I saved?" It was this attitude that made many people who knew her in her later years speak of her as a saint, but also as a disagreeable woman; but if she was rigid to others she was a thousand times more severe to herself. At the end of the Collinson affair, the iron began to enter her soul; later, it entered her poetry and enclosed her world in a tight, narrow ring which no conscious imperfection or heresy was allowed to penetrate. Her work is not the worse for it, because her style became purer, her music took on a muted anguish, as if the unbearable had found voice and form. This quality, this something, that certainly resembles intolerance in her work and personality was found somewhat sinister by members of a more skeptical, more relaxed generation, like Violet Hunt.

But let us return to 1849. Christina Rossetti is a very young girl; she is nineteen years old; she is very much in love with John Collinson, and he with her. By returning to the Church of Rome, he is threatening to leave her. She is unyielding on this point; she will not marry a Roman Catholic, and this Collinson knows. She who was to oppose the first stirrings of the feminist movement and who was to say in one of her later sonnets,

Let woman fear to teach and bear to learn,
Remembering the first woman's first mistake,

never seemed to feel that she might have been more sympathetic to John Collinson's scruples and shiftings of belief. Did she love him enough to share God and her poetry with him? At least we know that there was a real emotion behind this conflict, and that it had a permanent effect on her health and mind and certainly on her next and last serious love affair. She might have said with another poet, "My Eros is crucified." Certainly her Eros was never quite restored to natural sunlight or to living air.

4

We have seen the iron enter her soul and sound in her verse. She became more austere in her dress, more careful to read nothing that would contaminate her mind and spirit, she avoided theatres and concerts. Her austerity gave her poetry a kind of singularity and flavor; all her music was drawn from the mournful discordance and sweetness that still lingered in her soul. Maria and her mother had disapproved of Collinson all along. William Michael and Dante Gabriel himself did not share the fervor of their religious beliefs, and this too was a cross. But in this sorrow they united as Italian women—it was not for them to argue, to be anything but graceful and submissive to their men. They could pray for them, and a lifetime of not quite fulfilled prayer went up for these hesitant males.

It was hard for one who loved music, light, color, not to enter a theatre, or for one who was young and pretty to become indifferent to dress; but this Christina did. It was noticed that after her romance with Collinson was over she gave up all attempt at fashionable dress. She was usually very neat, very careful about her appearance, and sometimes her severe simplicity gave her a strange elegance; but on the whole she seemed apathetic to fine clothes, and to those, like Edmund Gosse, who liked smart-

ness she seemed dowdy. She became the Christina of the well known Max Beerbohm cartoon whom her brother could address severely, "Christina, your heart may be like a singing bird, but why do you dress like a pew opener?" Yet when she came to sum up her life at the end she did not know regret. In her "Notes on the Commandments" she wrote:

True, all our lives long we shall be bound to restrain our soul and keep it low; but what then? For the books we now forbear to read we shall one day be endowed with wisdom and knowledge. For the music we will not listen to, we shall join in the Song of the Redeemed. For the pictures from which we turn, we shall gaze unabashed on the Beatific Vision. For the companionship we shun, we shall be welcomed with angelic society, and the communion of triumphant saints, for the amusements we avoid, we shall keep the supreme jubilee. For the pleasures we miss, we shall abide, and for evermore abide, in the rapture of Heaven. It cannot be much of a hardship to dress modestly and at small cost, rather than richly and fashionably, if with conviction we are awaiting the white robes of the redeemed.*

Her ideas about edification and pleasure must have made her seem very odd even to her high-minded Victorian female contemporaries. Someone must have complained about her indifference to dress and the fashionable, or at least customary, amusements. She insisted that if one went to a theatre it was to be seen, not to hear or see. This strange observation was followed by remarks that throw much light on her character. "We insist on being attractive when all that is required of us is to be attracted."

5

Christina's love affair with Collinson was, perhaps, doomed from the beginning. Even in her earliest poems the theme of

* From *Letter and Spirit* (1883), "Notes on the Commandments."

love went hand in hand with the theme of renunciation. Her dying love-struck maidens sleeping eternally under roses, lilies, and violets have tasted all the pangs of unconsummated love, her maiden martyrs always turned from an earthly to a heavenly lover, almost with a sigh of relief. How much of this was due to adolescent emotionalism, ill health, and the intense religious atmosphere that enveloped her mother and her sister Maria? We see the pattern clearly in a very good poem written at the age of fifteen, "The Martyr," or in other poems of the same period where the theme of love is always linked to renunciation:

Alas, alas, mine earthly love, alas,
For whom I thought to don the garments white
And white wreath of a bride, this rugged pass
Has utterly divorced me from thy care;
Yea, I am to thee as a shattered glass
Worthless with no more beauty lodging there,
Abhorred lest I involve thee in my doom.

Read with some knowledge of human nature, we can see that she was repeating the solitary's plea to be left alone. To friends her manner seemed now to have chilled into reserve bordering on hauteur, which gave her an air of doing everything from self-respect and not from fellow feeling. Christina herself knew of this fault and made efforts to correct it, but was not always successful. It is to this trait more than any other that Violet Hunt in a later generation referred as her "rather disagreeable saint-hood." And in a way it is true that the Victorian devotee had become a saint—an Anglican saint—if unending devotion, unending prayer and self-examination, and self-denial make a saint.

During her engagement to Collinson she had paid a visit to his family at Pleasley Hill, Nottingham, and the brief accounts of her visit in letters written to her brother William breathe an

atmosphere of uneasiness, a feeling of not "fitting in." The gap between the dull, conventional world of Collinson's family and the Rossettis is only too clear. It is also obvious that the Collinsons looked upon the intense-looking, foreign girl with doubtful eyes. We see her watching for the postman a little too eagerly, we see her reading poetry to Collinson's sister and receiving little response, we see her lost in daydreams while Collinson's relatives make the customary remarks about "beaux." She was glad to return home, too glad, as her brother William noticed.

Meanwhile Collinson had written himself out of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in a letter so characteristic that William Michael Rossetti copied it down in his diary with an almost angry humor. We can be sure that Dante Gabriel shrugged his shoulders with relief, for Collinson had become to him something worse than a fool, a prig, or a knave—he had become an intolerable bore. It was to Dante Gabriel that the letter was written:

I feel that as a sincere Catholic I can no longer allow myself to be called a P.R.B., in the brotherhood sense of the term, or to be connected in any way with the magazine [*The Germ*]. Perhaps the determination to withdraw myself from the Brotherhood is altogether a matter of feeling. I am uneasy about it. I love and reverence God's faith and I love His Holy Saints, and I cannot bear any longer the self-accusation that to gratify a little vanity I am helping to dishonor them and lower their merits, if not absolutely to bring their sanctity into ridicule. I cannot blame any one but myself. Whatever may be my thoughts with regard to their works, I am sure that all the P.R.B.'s have both written and painted conscientiously; it was for me to have judged beforehand whether I could conscientiously as a Catholic assist in spreading opinions of those who are not. . . . Please do not attempt to change my mind.

Nobody attempted, nobody cared. Even Christina seems to have kept silent. Dante Gabriel had found a more satisfactory disciple

to fill Collinson's place in the legendary, ill-fated Walter Deverell. The magazine referred to so wistfully by Collinson had served its purpose—it had become one of the little magazines that make literary history by introducing a few fine new talents. When *The Germ* died in May, 1850, a short time after the Collinson letter, it had introduced Dante Gabriel in a poem that he was never to equal for beauty, melody, and his characteristic sensuous-mystic imagery: "The Blessed Damozel." He had evoked the blessed damozel out of a dream, and she appeared to him as if he had invoked her in an incantation. Walter Deverell had discovered her for him in a millinery shop in Cranbourn Alley.

6

The Germ * had in different issues also introduced Christina in two of her most characteristic early poems, the lovely "Dream Land" and "An End," and some of her early masterpieces, the famous "When I Am Dead, My Dearest," "Remember," and "Oh Roses for the Flush of Youth." In her case, too, *The Germ* had served its purpose. The few who read and appreciated poetry had noticed her and were never to be disappointed. The color and richness of texture that characterized the Pre-Raphaelites in painting and poetry appeared in these early poems, and yet they had something unique too, something more evasive and delicate. They had a purity of line, and a simplicity uncharacteristic of the Pre-Raphaelites that has made one of her critics compare her in these verses to Simonides or Meleager, or to others of the smaller fine masters in the Greek Anthology. And surely

* The story of *The Germ* is well known, and it is Christina Rossetti's association with it that linked her with the Pre-Raphaelites. Started in 1849 by Dante Gabriel and his friends, it may be considered as the forerunner of many magazines that start out to further the cause of Arts and Letters but end by furthering the reputations of a few. Christina's poems in it were greatly admired, more so than Dante Gabriel's. *The Germ* died in 1850 with its fourth number.

the second stanza of "When I Am Dead, My Dearest" has the limpid purity of the lyric Greek rather than the cool sharpness of the Latin masters:

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

The charm of this and other small lyrics of the period lies in their ease and spontaneity. They give one the impression that they were conceived in white heat, and almost wrote themselves. It is only on examination that we can see the art that sets their form and preserves them for us. Such "naturals" are rare even with the best lyric poets. In modern poetry we can find it achieved in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," or we can find an earlier example in Landor's "Rose Aylmer."

By 1850 Christina had found herself in art and lost the tenuous Collinson. He faded into the obscurity from which he had come, and appears again wrapped in mist and conjecture. We hear that he attempted to join the Jesuit order, where he found the discipline too severe, that a short time after the engagement was broken off, Christina saw him by accident in the neighbourhood of Regent's Park and fainted away. As William Michael bluntly remarked, he "never rose to any real eminence" in the arts; but he lived on in the flesh if not in history. He married a sister of the Catholic painter John Rogers Herbert, a name once well known but now as shadowy as Collinson's. He had a son, and William Michael, after meeting Collinson on the street when

they were both middle-aged, remarked sardonically that Collinson's religious zeal like his poetry had dimmed somewhat with the years. But then, meeting William Michael's cold, wise, remembering Italian eyes may have unnerved Collinson. Besides, the Rossettis were now so talked about, so famous, and he had failed, and was obscure and poor! He died in 1881, and Christina received the news with the melancholy silence that had become usual with her. But to a clergyman who asked permission to use some of her devotional poems in an anthology she remembered some of Collinson's poems that had appeared in *The Germ* and recommended them with a sensitive warmth. To her imagination, alert, tremulous, reaching into worlds beyond this world, Collinson had become a dream, but a dream of the kind that troubles our waking hours. In 1860 when she was thirty years old she was able to write out this feeling, though she may have thought of other people, other states of vision, in her poem "Mirage":

The hope I dreamed of was a dream,
Was but a dream; and now I wake,
Exceeding comfortless, and worn, and old,
For a dream's sake.

I hang my harp upon a tree,
A weeping willow in a lake;
I hang my silenced harp there, wrung and snapt
For a dream's sake.

Lie still, lie still, my breaking heart;
My silent heart, lie still and break:
Life, and the world, and mine own self, are changed
For a dream's sake.

CHAPTER FOUR



The Sea of Glass and Fire and the Four-leaved Trefoil

(1850-1862)

"IT is over, the terrible pain," Christina had written; but the process of healing was slow. We know that she fainted shortly after the engagement had been broken for good, when she saw Collinson near Regent's Park. William Michael tells the story with the annoyance which we feel between the lines whenever he mentions Collinson. That feeling was something stronger than dislike. Was it really over, or did the bitterness enter her soul and circumscribe her life as her biographers have always insisted? There is another clue to William Michael's attitude in a stray remark of Violet Hunt's that Collinson had attempted to see Christina again after his marriage, vacillating as usual; that her passion had sprung up again, and for a moment she had thought of an elopement. Her sister Maria, whose religious convictions were firmer and stronger, had discovered this and had saved Christina from committing a mortal sin. "But for a week of nights the kind sonsy creature crouched on the mat by the house door and saved her sister from the horrors of an elopement with a man who belonged to another." * George Meredith

* Violet Hunt, *The Wife of Rossetti*, p. xiii: "The secret has been well kept . . . She could never, in verse, keep off the subject, so dreadful then to the lay mind that no one had the moral hardihood to read between the lines." Curiously enough, the story Violet Hunt relates is very similar to a legend prevalent about Emily Dickinson and her sister. The legend, perhaps spreading from England

had known of the episode, says Violet Hunt, and told her that he had written his *Tale of Chloe* around this submerged Pre-Raphaelite legend. If the story is true, we can understand the undertone of guilt that entered Christina's poetry and life, and the atmosphere of repressed passion that enters such poems as "The Convent Threshold" with its dwelling on themes considered so unfitting for a well nurtured, devout Victorian lady:

There's blood between us, love, my love,

.

My lily feet are stained with mud,
With scarlet mud which tells a tale
Of hope that was, of guilt that was,
Of love that shall not yet avail;
Alas, my heart, if I could bare
My heart, this selfsame stain is there:
I seek the sea of glass and fire
To wash the spot, to burn the snare;

.

I tell you what I dreamed last night.
It was not dark, it was not light,
Cold dews had drenched my plenteous hair
Through clay; you came to seek me there,
And "Do you dream of me?" you said.
My heart was dust that used to leap
To you; I answered half asleep:
"My pillow is damp, my sheets are red,
There's a leaden tester to my bed:
Find you a warmer playfellow,
A warmer pillow for your head,
A kinder love to love than mine."

to New England where Christina Rossetti and her brothers had many readers, admirers, and acquaintances, may at last have become confused when Miss Dickinson became famous.

You wrung your hands: while I, like lead,
Crushed downwards through the sodden earth:
You smote your hands but not in mirth,
And reeled but were not drunk with wine.

In this, the most powerful of her early poems, we no longer see the slight, pale girl who receives the messenger of the Lord in her brother's picture. The large lily has been put aside, and she is walking on a sea of glass and fire.

2

There were hard realities awaiting the Rossetti family through the years 1850 to 1854. Old Gabriele's semi-blindness unfitted him for any remunerative employment. Teaching and writing had become almost impossible, and he walked back and forth in his untidy study feeling the presence of his loved but now unread books, and sometimes showing scant Christian meekness and resignation under his affliction. Maria—the practical Maria—had gone out as a governess. Dante Gabriel as yet was earning nothing, but whatever little money could be borrowed and scraped together was put aside for the eldest son, on whom the family centered so much hope. At the age of sixteen, William Michael, through the influence of one of his father's friends, had received a post as an extra clerk in the Inland Revenue office, and through this and occasional book reviewing and art criticism he was able to assume some of the family burdens. But his schooling was cut short, and though in later years he became a man of wide reading and real culture, yet something of the shyness, lack of self-confidence, and occasional awkwardness of the self-educated overcame him even at the height of his career, when he was a literary pundit.

Often now in the small garden of their home, old Gabriele could be found sitting, a shadow of the old poet-revolutionary,

the fiery Cavaliere. Murmuring quotations from Dante or scraps of his own poetry to a generation that certainly knew little of the first and almost nothing of the latter, his courage failed him. For a while he thought of applying to the King of Naples for a pardon and returning to Italy. There is some evidence that he made a faint-hearted attempt to do this. Perhaps he had dreams of an official post or a pension, for was he not a great Italian poet? There in the translucent sunshine of his own Italy beside her violet-blue waters, he could end his life in tranquillity, poetry, and patriotism. His failing eyesight would be restored under such conditions, doubly restored in the native sunlight. But the cold English silence, so calm, so well bred, and coming from his women, must have disturbed these reveries. He knew that his half-English wife and children were more English at heart than the English. And to return to Italy under the King's pardon of his revolutionary past? Would not this be a betrayal of his principles in one who had fought Princes and Church in the battle for Italian liberty?

Mrs. Rossetti now reverted to the occupation of her youth and opened a small day school for the daughters of the trades-people in the neighborhood. Christina "though she had no propensity to educational and other drudgery," says William Michael, willingly assisted her. If Christina had time to dream of Collinson and of that "lake of glass and fire" of which she was to write in "The Convent Threshold," it was only at night. The day school was a failure. Aunt Charlotte Polidori was called upon, who had been a governess in the family of the Marquis of Bath and was now the companion of the Dowager Marchioness. Among the splendors and grandeurs and beauties of Longleat, she remembered her nephews and nieces. It was she who persuaded Lady Bath to purchase Dante Gabriel's first paintings, and to make an even more welcome offer of patronage to the

young artist. Lady Bath was also a good churchwoman with a leaning toward High Church ritual. She had recently appointed to a living at Frome-Selwood Dr. Bennett, a rather too ritualistic parson whose services aroused Disraeli's wit, for he had long shared his Sovereign Lady's lifelong opinion that low church was high enough. "High Jinks," he called the Reverend Dr. Bennett's services; but then Disraeli was always to remain unaffected by the Oxford Movement. He was not the type. Mrs. Rossetti, her sisters, and her daughters found Dr. Bennett very congenial and thought that with some countenance from him, and with the patronage of Lady Bath they would be able to conduct a day school at Frome. Both Dr. Bennett and Lady Bath were obliging, and Christina and Mrs. Rossetti and old Gabriele transferred themselves to Frome while Maria, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael remained in London.

Even now, across the space of a century, we can detect in the family letters grief at this change and separation. Old Gabriele Rossetti in his dreamy way had given them a sheltered household and the precarious security of the genteel poor. Now all this seemed swept away, and the anguish of poverty beset them, that poverty which in Victorian England carried an almost criminal, a guilty terror. They never forgot this nightmare in later years. Perhaps Dante Gabriel felt it least. Genial, warm, his charm drawing him into friendships and into the channels that lead to success, he felt free for the first time away from his mother's narrow religiosity, his father's passionate, plaintive demands, his sisters' severe and high idealism. In the year that Christina severed her engagement to John Collinson, he had met Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal whose beauty and red hair the Pre-Raphaelites were to carry like a flaming banner, and in whose pictured image they were to conquer.

3

The mysterious English grandmother, long an invalid, was dying. It was from Mrs. Polidori that Christina had inherited her very unusual eyes—"dawn-colored eyes," one observer called them—which Holman Hunt had used for the eyes of his Christ in his famous "Light of the World." The school at Frome was unsuccessful too, as family troubles fell around them. Mrs. Rossetti had to return to London to nurse her mother and Christina, city-bred, never felt at home in the country.

For a time Christina tried to amuse herself with drawing, and while she nursed her ailing father she turned to her verses again—but they were not her best. Perhaps it was the feeling that if she wrote prose instead of poetry she would be able to earn a solid sum of money that turned Christina to writing a short and dismal little novel called *Maude*, which in a revised form was published more than twenty years later. Like almost all her attempts at fiction, *Maude* is devoid of ultimate merit. It is interesting now chiefly because of its autobiographical content and its curiously virtuous, but unpleasing feminine characters that make them excellent period pieces.

The melancholy period spent with her sick father, an unsuccessful school in a dull town and separation from the stimulating companionship of her brothers came to an end, as usual, through the untiring efforts of that paragon, William Michael. With his raise in salary at the Inland Revenue office to two hundred and fifty pounds a year and his appointment as art critic on the staff of the *Spectator* (where he wrote of his brother's genius and his brother's friends), he was able to offer a home to his family—a house in Albany Street, near Regent's Park. The two Polidori aunts, Eliza and Margaret, lived near them in lodgings, and there they were all together again—oh, happiness!—the devout aunts, Mrs. Rossetti, and her two pale, serious young daughters. Again

Dante Gabriel brought his interesting friends to the house, again the noise of excitement and discussion. This intellectual stimulus was good after the gray interval at Frome. Again Christina sat quietly in the background saying little, almost unnoticed in that gay, bright, quick company. They were full of the great works which they would some day achieve, *were* achieving now, it almost seemed. When Christina did speak, it was noticed that she had a habit of saying something sharp, caustic, penetrating in a dreamy gentle voice. The fact was that, though she admired her brother and his friends, she had a world of her own or rather two worlds, split, conflicting, different. One was a world of sensuous imagery and warm coloring, full of paradisiacal gardens and golden, never-falling fruit, in the arched shadows of which walked angels listening to an invisible choir whose exotic music seemed put to English words. Then there was another world, a gray, silver-shimmering world seen through the rain and clouds and red brick chimneys of nineteenth century London. It was a world where the stern realist God of her belief dwelt. But in her the reasonable just God of the Established Church had touched depths and fervors unknown to Pusey, Keble, the early Newman, or Froude. It was true that Newman had once written to Froude, "Human sacrifice, self-torture,—these are man's natural means of propitiating the unseen powers of Heaven." Christina would have understood that remark at once. With such thoughts she found the conversation of her brother's friends too light—a little horrifying. They were so gay about serious things! Dante Gabriel had been heard to say of women that they were so much nicer when they had lost their virtue! Once when she and Maria were speaking with envy of the virgin saints and martyrs, Dante Gabriel had smiled and said that they too must have their share of martyrdom in having such undevout brothers! But, harsh to themselves, they were always full of love and admiration for this enchanting elder brother with his beautiful

voice, witty eyes, and caressing manner. They prayed for him more fervently, but no signs of conversion were seen. William Michael, thoughtful, formal, courteous, said things that made him sound like a skeptic, almost an atheist—there was no other word for it. And Mrs. Rossetti had her moments of difficulty. In looking over some of old Gabriele's Italian poems she came upon some mystical poems, amorous in their tendencies, that she felt ought to be destroyed. The old man's eyesight had improved a little, but his general health was on the decline. He was able to write again, and he was beginning to talk much of God. His God seemed confused and unorthodox to the Rossetti women; in spite of that He was a refuge for Gabriele's wild, uneasy spirit. Like Charles II, Gabriele was a long time dying; but at last the end came on April 26, 1854, his family around him, even the beloved and difficult Dante Gabriel having been called away from the red-gold hair and strange eyes of his "Sid." Dante Gabriel alone was to commemorate this last scene in his memorial sonnet, "Dantis Tenebrae," recalling how even at the baptismal font his father had dedicated him to art and poetry:

And didst thou know indeed, when at the font
Together with thy name thou gav'st me his,
That also on thy son must Beatrice
Decline her eyes according to her wont,
Accepting me to be of those that haunt
The vale of magical dark mysteries
Where to her hills her poet's foot-track lies

For here, where day still soothes my lifted face,
On thy bowed head, my father, fell the night.

Curiously enough it was not on the favorite eldest son, but on the mild, ever helpful William who had brought security to his household, that old Gabriele turned his last glance. He *felt*

since he could not see William's presence at his bedside. "It is William, I see him, I hear him, he is written on my heart." And again and again he spoke of the pleasure of having all his children around him, his deep and warm pride as a parent swallowing up the memory of Gabriele Rossetti, poet and improvvisatore, who by his stirring poems against the oppressors of his native land had persuaded a whole regiment of Italian soldiers in the Austrian service to desert and join the side of their countrymen. The Curator of Bronze and Marbles in the Museum of Naples, the friend and collaborator of Rossini, the friend of Ugo Foscolo returned in spirit to his own Italy and to his native Vasto, where he felt his memory *must* survive. But the women around his bed were relieved when with his last breath he called upon God—whether in pain or in devotion, we do not know. "Ah, Dio ajutami Tu," he murmured. They carved these words upon his tomb and also the words of the sad prophet Jeremiah: "He shall return no more, nor see his native country."

A scholarly, almost pedantic youth with large blue eyes and a shuffling, abstracted gait, named Charles Bagot Cayley, had shown great solicitude during old Gabriele's illness, and called twice after his death. He had come for private lessons in Italian when Gabriele's dimming eyes made it impossible for him to continue his teaching at King's College. The young man's passion for the Italian language, and especially for Dante, had won him Gabriele's respect and affection and had endeared him to the Rossetti women. Something in his shy manner, his absent-mindedness, reminded Christina of Collinson; but Cayley was a man of richer culture and finer breeding. He was to loom large in Christina's life, but it was his kindness, his attention to her dying father, that first made her notice him.

Christina returned to her writing after her father's death and two months later she wrote one of her most characteristic sonnets, "The World." The dreaminess, the languid music had disappeared now, the rhythms that seem to flow from some subaqueous source are no longer there. We see Christina now as she will often appear, the young woman who has restricted her reading to few books other than the Scriptures, who has given up the theatre because it gives her too much pleasure, whose strictness toward herself is beginning to extend (in spite of her efforts to avoid this fault) to others. The language is biblical; the images are harsh, and the music full of the powerful prose cadences of the King James Bible. It is a strange portrait of the world for an attractive and gifted young woman to draw, but it is *her* vision of the universe; and it is sad to think that her troubled concern for her brothers' and her father's spiritual welfare, the shock of her broken engagement to Collinson may have added to the dark sediment that made dismal the clear waters of her mind. Surely she could not have found such hopeless and angry darkness in the words of the gentle Christ who loved the beasts of the field, and the lilies in their brief glory? He had come to save the world and not to destroy it, but with Christina one often feels from now on that much that was sensuous, passionate, and delightful in her nature, her love of color and warmth and beauty, was self-slain. But the struggle never ceased within her—slain once, twice, again it arose, to give the struggle perpetual life.

"*Pray without ceasing.*" The time came when she took these words literally; but now her character was still forming, and the iron circle which was to draw around her life was still unseen. Even the pleasure she took in her writing was tainted with a

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sense of guilt. She had written when not quite certain of her aims and of her desires:

Sometimes I said: "It is an empty name
I long for; to a name why should I give,
The peace of all the days I have to live?"—
Yet gave it all the same.

Alas thou foolish one! alike unfit
For healthy joy and salutary pain:
Thou knowest the chase useless, and again
Turnest to follow it.

Christina Rossetti had published about seven poems in *The Germ*, and they had established her fame in a quiet way. They were not her first published poems, for she had published before she was twenty in the *Athenaeum*, thanks to the influence of her brother William, who even in his youth knew how to win over influential editors and influence them in favor of the meritorious. The poems published in the *Athenaeum*—"The Last Hope" and "Death's Chill Between"—justify their chilly titles; already they bear the author's touch of individuality. They are tender, fluttering poems, characteristic of her maternal attitudes to love and to her lovers. She longs to take her beloved in from the cold and chill, to shelter him in her arms from all disaster; in fact a tremulous girlish pathos lends these early poems some interest. They are exactly the poems we might have expected the teen-age little virgin who sat for Dante Gabriel's "Ecce Ancilla Domini" to write. But in the few years that had elapsed since the death of *The Germ* she had found that publication for her verse was still not easily accomplished, though the peculiar flavor of her poems had sunk deep into a small, discriminating, but still unimportant minority of poetry readers.

Between household tasks, sometimes leaning over her wash-stand table in her small bedroom, she kept turning out poems and putting them away in her writing desk. Scrupulously she examined her poems, carefully she examined her soul for the slightest taint of ambition, for was not ambition in itself a sin, a form of vanity? Fearfully she withdrew into prayer, and then consulted Maria, the strong, wise sister whose faith knew no shadow of turning. In later years Edmund Gosse, who had met both sisters, thought of Maria as a rather sinister figure. Her character had too much force, her intellect was too narrow, her imagination even more limited. Her influence on Christina, he felt, was as devastating as that of the evangelical preacher Newton upon the poet Cowper—Newton, who seemed urged on by guilt or suppressed hate toward the gentle poet whose soul he wished to save. Maria's strong hold on Christina's mind, he described as "a species of police surveillance." But Gosse, who liked fashionable, charming women, was not taken by Maria, who no doubt saw through his light, bright mind and was not amused by literary small talk. Gosse noticed Maria's torpor when he visited the Rossettis, and said that it needed the name of Dante to arouse her from her heavy silence. Maria was not so silent with Ruskin, and her admiration for him brought out her latent brilliance and gave beauty to her expressive face that resembled more and more, as she grew older, some portrait by a primitive painter of the Siennese school. Ruskin responded to her warmth, which was full of a trembling, unspoken, love that touched the cold, lonely man. Her high-mindedness appealed to his high-mindedness as deep calls to deep. But he did not like Christina, and when Dante Gabriel showed him some of her poems he brushed them aside. Like Gosse, he liked a particular kind of woman, one who was delicate, romantic, beautiful, unviolent, and somewhat sexless. The suppressed, overcharged passion hidden under the quiet correctness of the Rossetti sisters was felt rather than under-

stood by him, and he recoiled without stopping to name his nameless uneasiness. But Maria's humble devotion and admiration, her high seriousness, her distinction of mind were interesting; as for Christina, she dressed unaesthetically and had a caustic tongue. The caustic tongue, though too consciously now held in restraint, began to be noticed more and more by people who met her. She herself was not unaware of this, and more and more in her letters and private devotions she makes her sorrowful reflections on her shortcomings. She was, she felt, not so good, or so wise as Maria, her faith was not so pure; it was true she was harried, made too passionate by ambition, by vanity, by a desire that the world should know and admire her gifts. Whenever she wrote a poem she thought was unusually good, she dreamed—if only for a while—of fame, of publication. Then there were moments when a regret, if not for Collinson at least for love, shook her slight body; and the dreams in which angels, and fruit, and flowers, and small creeping things seemed somehow to crowd together in a gorgeous, but not heavenly, landscape. The world around her in these moments became unnaturally clear. With a poet's eye she saw lizards whose "strange metallic mail, just spied and gone," disappeared like "darted lightnings"; or she saw:

Frogs and fat toads were there to hop or plod
And propagate in peace, an uncouth crew,
Where velvet-headed rushes rustling nod
And spill the morning dew.

Or these visions of the natural living world were suddenly set up against a vision of another order, and the angels who troubled her dreams flew down with a swift and stormy sweep of wings:

Oft-times one like an angel walked with me,
With spirit-discerning eyes like flames of fire

But deep as the unfathomed endless sea,
Fulfilling my desire.

Christina turned to Maria for help, and the advice and help were always forthcoming: Maria never shirked a duty, a good impulse. Maria was beginning to find admirers, too, among them Charles Collins, an artist of minor gifts, the brother of Wilkie Collins, and afterwards the son-in-law of Charles Dickens. He was a pious, sensitive young man, who was to die with grandly conceived, badly executed pictures around his bed—alas, they were all unfinished! He had the delicate frame and the wistful air of the short-lived; there was something about him that reminded people of Collinson, but perhaps it was only his deep piety. Maria did not respond; the one man she might have loved was John Ruskin. Ruskin, finely strung, highly sensitive, might well have felt Maria's shy ardor trembling on the verge of something more, for it became apparent that he was somewhat uncomfortable when he called and found the Rossetti ladies in, and William Michael and Dante Gabriel out. Later, in *Time Flies*, Christina was to write of this moment in her sister's life and draw a moral from it:

One of the most genuine Christians I ever knew, once took lightly the dying out of a brief acquaintance which had engaged her warm heart, on the ground that such mere tastes and glimpses of congenial intercourse on earth wait for their development in heaven.

Maria began to look more and more like an Italian primitive. Her faith grew stronger and surer as she renounced more of her human desires, and unlike Christina she took her renunciations with cheerfulness. Each pleasure, each desire renounced, was like another heavy, useless, garment thrown away, until she stood in her spirit's nakedness before God. When her brothers brought home a book of Blake's drawings for the sisters to ad-

mire, Maria turned her head away, though moved as they all were by the power and beauty of the imagination that had created them. In one drawing God the Father was represented as sitting on a throne of clouds, contemplating the earth beneath, overwhelming and majestic. Maria shuddered and refused to see more. Wasn't the representation of the Deity a direct violation of the second commandment? In the British Museum, Maria had suddenly left the mummy room, overcome by fearful scruples. Suppose, suppose, she had thought—oh, fearful thought!—that the Day of Resurrection should come, as it must come, when we are least aware, and while she was in this very place? Would it not seem frightful, indelicate even, if the dried corpses arose and put on their flesh and immortal life before all the sight-seers? Christina told this story of her sister with awe and admiration.

She herself, as we know, had already given up going to the theatre, the opera, because they gave her too much pleasure, they filled her with excitement and distracted her mind from the love of God. Was there any other pleasure she could renounce? She now gave up playing chess when she discovered that she enjoyed winning. Nothing remained but her devotions and her poems; and Maria, so much her mentor in all things, did not disapprove of the last, for they were the children of a poet, and the love of literature, of art, of beauty, was a sacred thing when used in the service and to the glory of God. Maria was writing a book on Dante, and Christina wished that she could also do some brilliant work on the great Florentine—it seemed part of the family tradition, almost a duty. But she could not compete with Maria's strong intellect and critical gifts. We find Maria thanking Mr. Cayley for his great help on her Dante and saying that Mr. Longfellow, the American poet, who had been visiting England, had told her that a work on Dante was just the thing for Boston. In fact, Maria was a fine example of the tragic Vic-

torian waste of brilliant women whose unused energies and strong gifts either festered or died for lack of opportunities. As it was, her executive abilities were exercised within her small family group, and later in the convent, where she was to find release for her unrest and longing.

In the years 1853 and 1854, Christina was collecting poems for a book. Never was there a poet who had so little of the airs and graces of a "poetess," who talked so little about her art, and perfected it more. The heated arguments about poetry and art that she had heard in the little groups gathered around her brothers did not interest her; she wrote as if her words and music were drawn from the air. All the gray, cold world dissolved around her as she wrote, and the great delight and relief she had in writing entered her imagery:

But bring me poppies brimmed with sleepy death,
And ivy choking what it garlandeth,
And primroses that open to the moon.

"Disquisitions on metres are somewhat my antipathy," she wrote at the end of her life to a friend, Wyndham Dunstan; and her brother's friends, all young men with careers in the making, all eager and well informed on the latest, the most talked-about novelties in poetry, seeing that she never joined in their talk on the technics of the arts, paid little attention to her and her poetry, and never noticed that in her (at this period) they had the purest, most characteristic Pre-Raphaelite of them all. Years later, when many of their hopes and ambitions had fallen into the salt sorrow of oblivion, they still tried to ignore her in their reminiscences. They remembered Dante Gabriel, his warmth and lazy charm, and though he was dead they still tried (in vain!) to shake off the magic chains which had bound him to them. But though Christina had become a distinguished and

well known, if not popular, poet they still acted as if she did not exist.

There must have been moments of great discouragement as her poems came back from magazines in spite of the efforts of her brothers to place them. The handsome, blue-eyed, black-haired young Irishman William Allingham, a friend of Dante Gabriel, reprinted one of her poems in an anthology he edited; but Allingham had a touch of rare poetry which, if it never became first rate, always remained fine. He, in his poetry at least, was to feel that he had as much spiritual kinship with Christina as with her brother.

Since the brief flush of praise when her poems were published in *The Germ*, praise had become rare. That there were difficulties, a letter written about this time to the editor of the *Athenaeum* * makes clear. It is a touching letter and has the diffident air of all her correspondence about her poetry:

I am not unaware, Sir, that the editor of a magazine looks with dread and contempt upon the offerings of a nameless rhymester and that the feeling is in 19 cases out of 20, a just and salutary one. It certainly is not for me to affirm, that I am the one twentieth in question, but speaking as I am to a poet,* in hope I shall not be misunderstood as guilty of egotism or foolish vanity when I say that my love for what is good in the works of others, teaches me that there is something not despicable in mine; that poetry is with me not a mechanism, but an impulse and reality, and that I know my aims in writing to be pure and directed to what is true and right.

We do not know if the poems sent at this particular moment were accepted; but the eager humility that prompted the letter came from a definite impulse to write, to publish, to disclose her gifts to the world. She was again stirred by thoughts of love,

* William Edmondstoune Aytoun, who was a poet and critic of some note in his day. His Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers were spirited imitations of Scott, his criticism was noted for its ferocity.

of poetry; for her father's pupil, the gentle scholar Charles Cayley, was wooing her in his tentative, wistful way. It was pleasant to see him, to talk with him; but she did not respond so easily to him as she had done to Collinson, when she was only eighteen, and youth and life had just opened, and the whole world seemed young and beautiful and full of surprises. Somehow, she thought that if another springtime of love entered, it would be different this time, there would be no darkness nor gloom, all would be lighter, gayer, full of lyric light and color. There would be less of fear and anxiety, and more of warmth. Yes, this time there would be happiness. This thought she expressed in lighter, more cheerful verse than usual:

If I might see another Spring,
I'd not plant summer flowers and wait:
I'd have my crocuses at once,
My leafless pink mezereons,
My chill-veined snowdrops, choicer yet
My white or azure violet,
Leaf-nested primrose; anything
To blow at once, not late.

.

If I might see another Spring—
Oh stinging comment on my past
That all my past results in "if"—
If I might see another Spring
I'd laugh today, today is brief;
I would not wait for anything:
I'd use today that cannot last,
Be glad today and sing.

It was in a spirit of dedication and hope that she began working on "Goblin Market," that poem in which the splendid color, the fantasy, the imaginative beauty of the Pre-Raphaelite

dream were to be fulfilled as if through an artful artlessness. There is something so innocent and childlike about the tripping metrics and the fairy-tale atmosphere in which the poem begins that its cumulative effect and great technical skill remain almost unnoticed at first; so easy the narrative flow and the charm of the allegory. Then, on reflection, the imagery takes on a glow, a warmth pervades the fairylike atmosphere; under the innocent story of sisterly love, and longing for forbidden fruit, a sense of evil slowly darkens the bright childlike atmosphere. The mingling of the grotesque and the terrible, the sense of the trembling innocence that hovers on the abyss of the unnamable and the repulsive, make this strange little poem one of the masterpieces of English literature as well as a Pre-Raphaelite show piece. From its summerlike beginning when the sisters hear the goblins crying their wares—

“Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries;
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pineapples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;—
All ripe together
In summer weather”—

we are held under the spell of an atmosphere smiling and light-dappled until suddenly the air changes and the shadows approach. The charming picture of the two sisters walking through the rush-shaded, brook-running landscape, watching the gob-

lins carry their fantastic fruit on golden dishes, and the descriptions of the goblins—

One had a cat's face,
One whisked a tail,
One tramped at a rat's pace,
One crawled like a snail.—

retain their imaginative value when what is so charming might easily have become mere whimsy. Nor can we forget Laura's cold, sensory impression of the fruit after it has been obtained,

"Fresh on their mother twigs,
Cherries worth getting;
You cannot think what figs
My teeth have met in,
What melons icy-cold
Piled on a dish of gold
Too huge for me to hold,
What peaches with velvet nap,
Pellucid grapes without one seed:
Odorous indeed must be the mead
Wherein they grow, and pure the wave they drink
With lilies at the brink,
And sugar-sweet their sap."

Nor the idyllic portrait of the two sisters who seem to arise from one of the early Pre-Raphaelite pictures by the young Millais:

Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other's wings,
They lay down in their curtained bed:
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow,
Like two wands of ivory.

The redemption from unnamable evil of one sister through the intercession of an elder sister brings us to Violet Hunt's story of the attempted elopement with Collinson and Maria's prevention of what in Christina's eyes and her own would have been an unpardonable sin. If the story is true, or only partially true, it is certain that the love and awe-stricken devotion of a younger sister for an older one shines through this poem. In the final verses Christina surely pays her tribute to Maria as well as to the older sister of the poem who kept her younger sister from the dark, beautiful-seeming but evil meadows:

“For there is no friend like a sister,
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.”

Dante Gabriel had collected his sister's poems and sent the manuscript again to Ruskin, who was so appreciative of Maria's character and conversation and Elizabeth Siddal's beauty and talents. But Ruskin again said that he felt it his duty to report that no publisher would take them. They were, he reiterated, “full of quaintness and offenses.” There was an irregular measure about many of the poems which reminded him of Coleridge, and Coleridge had never been one of his favorite poets. Irregularity, he felt, was the curse of modern poetry. Everyone was experimenting, attempting to be different and original. He reminded Dante Gabriel that the *Iliad*, the *Divine Comedy*, the *Aeneid*, the whole of Spenser, Milton, and Keats are written without “license.” This, of course, was not what many of these poets had heard in their lifetime; but he then turned to exhort Christina to a stricter discipline, and half-heartedly promised to sound out a publisher or two.

Meanwhile Dante Gabriel was sending Christina long, careful letters of critical advice which she often rejected with a stubborn humility. To make matters more painful, he often interwove rapturous commendations of "Lizzie" Siddal with his advice. To Christina, whose days were given up to household duties, churchgoing, and the stealthy, almost desperate attempt to write poetry—poetry which she *knew* was good, and yet which seemed to mean so little to anyone out of her family circle—this seemed too much.

Rumors were reaching the Rossetti family about Elizabeth Siddal—"The Sid," as her brother had nicknamed her. Ford Madox Brown had seen "The Sid" at her brother's studio beautifully dressed and "looking like a queen." "The Sid" usually made her own clothes; she had, Christina remembered, been a milliner by profession and was clever with her needle. She managed to dress beautifully on very little money, and Dante Gabriel was proud of her thrift and cleverness. Perhaps he was advertising his sweetheart in advance in the hope of interesting his uninterested family in her. Christina had been painting when she found that discouragement prevented her from writing new poems; but, whenever she began to paint, her interest flagged quickly—her gifts did not flow with the spontaneous sureness that speaks of the true vocation. Dante Gabriel became more and more tactless:

Maria had just shown me a letter of yours by which I find that you have been perpetrating portraits of some kind. If you answer this note will you enclose a specimen. . . . You must take care however not to rival The Sid, but to keep within respectful limits.

Ruskin may have doubted the merits of "Goblin Market," but he had no doubts about the talents of "The Sid" as an artist. He had offered to buy everything she did, he had offered her a

fixed income for a number of years, he had financed a trip to Paris for the girl he thought so exquisite and gifted. To make things worse, Christina had only to look into the mirror to see her delicate beauty fading into a worn shadow of its early loveliness. Perhaps, turning from the dark-dappled mirror in her small bedroom and contemplating her shabby clothes, her unpublished manuscripts, she felt an unspoken resentment, an emotion quickly repressed but never killed. But Dante Gabriel's letters about "The Sid" were tiresome!

"Since you went away," he wrote, "I have sent among my things to Highgate a lock of hair shorn from the beloved head of that dear, and radiant as the tresses of Aurora, a sight of which may perhaps dazzle you on your return."

About this time Christina had a dream which moved her profoundly, and she was impelled to paint it. It has become the custom to read more into dreams than the dreamer could ever explain, but it may be wise to read into this particular dream the quality and essence of Christina's imagination in the grayest and most formative period of her existence. We have her notes for the painting, but not the painting itself:

Night but clear with grey light. Part of church in the background with the clock-side toward the spectator. In the churchyard many sheep with good innocent expressions, one especially heavenly. Amid them with full face a Satan-like goat lying with a kingly look and horns. Three white longish-haired dogs in front, confused with sheep though somewhat smaller than they: one with a flattering face, a second with head almost turned away, but what one sees of the face, sensual and abominable.

After this she wrote: "My Dream. C. G. R."

Macmillan & Company had accepted *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, her first regularly published book. The struggle for recognition had not been easy; but at last the door was

unlocked, the vistas, the prospects, the satisfactions of a recognized achievement were about to be hers. She welcomed the recognition with modesty, seriousness, and grace. Into what would have been a life of gray self-abnegation, poverty, and the limitations of the spirit that poverty always inflicts came the warmth of the recognition that artists strive for and yet must so often resign themselves to not receiving.

6

In her reading diary, *Time Flies*, Christina told how in childhood wandering through a field she had once come across a four-leaved trefoil which she was too ignorant to appreciate. Later she had gone back, hoping to find another; but the search was vain, and she had not yet found another. Christina used the story for her customary little moral lesson, and her moralizing has its significance: "Life has, so to speak, its four-leaved trefoils for a favoured few, and how many of us overlook and finally, our rare chance."

She was one of the favored few among the poets of the century. The time, the milieu into which she was born, the very nature of her gifts, morbid and delicate as they were, caught the fancy of the larger public in a way her brother's richer, showier poetry never did. Dante Gabriel's illustrations to "Goblin Market"—"rich and exquisite," as one critic called them—drew even more attention to the book, and added to the prestige of the Pre-Raphaelites. Later, Edmund Gosse, quoting Swinburne, was to speak of Christina's first book as the forerunner of victory for her brother and his friends: "She was the Jael who led the Pre-Raphaelite hosts to victory." A more demure, a more retiring Jael, it is impossible to imagine. Gosse was but half right. Two women gave glamour and prestige to the Pre-Raphaelite cause: Elizabeth Siddal with her haunting beauty, and Christina with her magical gift for lyric poetry. Later we might name

a third, Jane Morris. Dante Gabriel's "Sid" with her auburn hair "golden as the tresses of Aurora," heavy-lidded eyes, and long throat was to become the image the Pre-Raphaelites carried before them, their extraordinary vision of beauty personified in a living woman, in all its unearthly, its dream-drugged mystery. It was she that Dante Gabriel had seen as the blessed damozel with seven stars in her hair who, leaning from the gold bar of Heaven, saw "time like a pulse shake fierce through all the worlds." Characteristically, he had suggested to Macmillans that Elizabeth Siddal illustrate Christina's poems; but the suggestion was declined—one somehow suspects, by Christina, for Elizabeth Siddal's gifts were greatly admired in a small influential circle. The blessed damozel and the Victorian saint never met except with a faintly concealed dislike. It may have been Christina's revolt against many of the Pre-Raphaelite tenets; like Collinson, she did at times feel that her brother and his friends were—well, if not pagan, not exactly Christian. And her faith was still narrowing, narrowing into the dreadful thin iron circle of intensity. But then there is also the fact that Christina thought of herself as a poet, rather than as a Pre-Raphaelite poet, while Elizabeth Siddal was the Pre-Raphaelite dream incarnate, blood of its blood, essence of its essence. About her was the arrested dreamlike trance that took shape in the poetry and painting of others. When she died, the dream faded somehow, and became ghostly, gray, and obscure, as if her light and color had served to cover some secret weakness. Even the dark, sulky, questioning face of Jane Morris could not quite save it, for she was only the moon to Elizabeth Siddal's sun; the light that streamed from her beauty was of a flickering moon-silvered uncertainty. Christina moved in a world that remembered its Pre-Raphaelite origins, and yet was uniquely her own. Because of this she was Pre-Raphaelitism's most lasting heroine.



The Victorian Saint and The Blessed Damozel

WITH *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, Christina won a victory for the Pre-Raphaelites. Unlike many books that are immediately acclaimed, her first book anticipated the warm reception given to her later volumes of poems. The praise was not too violent, it was mild, modest, deep, and it was rarely if ever unsaid. The *National Review* remarked of *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, "The principal poem has a rare delicacy and beauty of a modest kind, and several of the sonnets are fine."

A few critics even discovered the beauty of her devotional poems, which have not even yet had full recognition. "*Goblin Market*" was one of her most brilliant *tours de force*; but it was not the only fine poem of the sixty or more in the pretty illustrated edition of 1862. Some of the lyrics in it, she was never to surpass: the dramatic "At Home," the famous "A Birthday"—surely one of the happiest expressions of lyrical emotion in the language:

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.*

* The William Morris interior decorating of this poem is part of its charm. And

In this poem and "Goblin Market," in her brother's "Blessed Damozel" and his painting "Beata Beatrix," in a few of Swinburne's poems of the *Poems and Ballads* period, in a poem or two by William Morris, in Millais's "Autumn Leaves" and perhaps his "Ophelia," in Arthur Hughes's "April Love" and poor Walter Deverell's "Lady Feeding a Bird" (poetically youthful, and delightful in color), we find the purest essence of the Pre-Raphaelite Ideal.

Goblin Market and Other Poems also contained Christina's famous "An Apple Gathering," which has been admired for its lyric grace and its lovely bits of landscape painting that breathe the lingering charm of an early autumn sunset. Curiously enough, the landscape and the figures seem to be out of Kate Greenaway pictures; their presence foreshadowed one aspect of the Pre-Raphaelite movement which gave birth to the most attractive book illustration * and influenced some of the most gifted book illustrators, including Kate Greenaway. Certainly in "An Apple Gathering" all the movement and imagery seem to arise from some pastel-tinted world. It is one of the most charming and accomplished but least intense of her poems.

In the same volume is her devotional masterpiece "Sleep at Sea," called by George Saintsbury one of the few great devotional poems in the language. The quick immediate imagery, which seems indeed to have risen out of the sea, with its smoky fog-riden atmosphere and the vision of the dead arising from their ocean graves and flitting from mast to mast, from ship to ship while the terror arises from the deep as in a waking nightmare, is indeed magnificent:

then again the "dais" as described by the poet might have come straight out of an interior by Whistler.

* Those who as children delighted in the Andrew Lang fairy books, *Blue, Green, Violet*, etc., have enjoyed the Pre-Raphaelites in their later book-illustrating metamorphosis.

Sound the deep waters:—
 Who shall sound that deep?—
 Too short the plummet,
 And the watchmen sleep.
 Some dream of effort
 Up a toilsome steep;
 Some dream of pasture grounds
 For harmless sheep.

White shapes flit to and fro
 From mast to mast;
 They feel the distant tempest
 That nears them fast:
 Great rocks are fast ahead,
 Great shoals not past;
 They shout to one another
 Upon the blast.

Oh soft the streams drop music
 Between the hills,
 And musical the birds' nests
 Beside those rills:
 The nests are types of home
 Love-hidden from ills,
 The nests are types of spirits
 Love-music fills.

As the strange, powerful poem arises to its majestic, biblical climax one feels that Ruskin's comparison of Christina with Coleridge was not unperceptive, for it has many elements that are Coleridgean in the best sense.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, who so much admired "The Convent Threshold" (also in this volume), found it disturbing.* Later "The Convent Threshold" received high but somewhat curious praise from Alice Meynell, one of the few fastidious

* He even wrote an answer to "The Convent Threshold." See Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Note-Books and Papers*, p. 16.

critics of the period that followed, who was also a Roman Catholic and of a powerful clique somewhat unsympathetic to the Pre-Raphaelites: *

In this poem—it is impossible not to dwell on such a masterpiece—without imagery—without beauty—except that which is inevitable (and what beauty is more costly); without the invincible grace of impassioned poetry; without music except the ultimate music of the communicating word; she utters that immortal song of love, and the cry of more than earthly fear, a song of penitence for love that yet praises love more fervently than would a chorus hymeneal.

One cannot help thinking that Mrs. Meynell, though she did not quite know it, was accusing Christina of writing a twentieth century poem, and that Gerard Manley Hopkins, who like Henry James's hero of *The Sense of the Past* had spiritual glimpses into the future, must have liked the poem and have been troubled by it for the same indefinable reason.

The poems mentioned are only part of the beautiful and enduring lyrics in this volume published in 1862. It is indeed one of the few volumes of poetry that the nineteenth century was to bequeath to the twentieth with the inscription, "To be preserved."

2

In the same year that Christina's book appeared, "The Sid" died under circumstances as enigmatic as her life. Dante Gabriel had married her only two years before, married her almost too late after their long courtship. Always now her frail long-limbed ghost haunted the women of the Rossetti family. A ghost in life, now in death disrobed of the unwelcome flesh that clothed her bones, her disturbing image hovered over them all, plaintive, more than ever a symbol of the dark fatality that had flashed

* Their chief object of attack was Swinburne, and many of them lived far enough into the next century to start a definite anti-Swinburne feeling in criticism. Thanks to the persuasive charm of the Sitwells, the tide is turning.

from Dante Gabriel's poems and paintings. With her, as we have said before, went some of the glamour of the Pre-Raphaelites. From now on the light flickered in uncertain or indifferent hands. Christina had never liked her, and it is in the relationship with her sister-in-law that we see Christina in her least amiable aspect.

The story of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal^{*} has been told often and told well, yet it is one of the strangest and most moving stories in literary history. Handsome young Walter Deverell, whose beauty made women to turn back and look at him in the streets, had discovered her in a millinery shop in Cranbourn Alley near Leicester Square, probably in 1849 or 1850 when Rossetti was already known as the rebel painter of his day, an esoteric poet, and the leader of a devoted band of disciples. Seeing the tall thin girl step into the shop window to arrange a display of bonnets, he was struck by her unearthly beauty, and he thought no one but Gabriel ought to paint her. The same day, he told Gabriel of his find, and Gabriel after one look knew that the face he had foretold in his poem was there.

It was not hard to engage her as a model. She was very poor, frail in health, very lonely, and found the long hours at the millinery shop tedious. She was very refined too—she took a vague interest in art and poetry, and had passed most of her scant leisure in her poverty-stricken, overcrowded home in reading and daydreaming. Nor was her beauty of a kind much appreciated by her associates in the millinery shop. No doubt to them she was simply a tall queer-looking girl with strange reserved manners and speech.

Very little is known of her parents. Her father was reputed to be a watchmaker, an auctioneer, or a cutler, and he may have been all of these at different times. We know that after her

* Violet Hunt has pointed out that the name was originally Siddall but Dante Gabriel had her drop an *l*, thinking it more aristocratic.

death Rossetti pensioned her two brothers, who seemed to be without occupation, and that her sisters, though good-looking, were simple, imperfectly educated girls and made obscure marriages.* Brought up in the slums in a family that made desperate efforts to keep up a semblance of refinement, she grew up like a changeling who had been dropped from the moon.

Before her discovery by the Pre-Raphaelite brethren she had found a poem by Tennyson on newsprint wrapped around a pat of butter she brought home to her mother. This gave her her first interest in what was then modern poetry. An event of her childhood had been the kindness shown by a neighbor, a Mr. Greenacre who was a small shopkeeper: one day when she fell down he lifted the frail little girl in his arms and carried her home. A year later Greenacre became the villain of one of the most brutal murder stories of the day. He had killed his "wife," dismembered and burnt her body, and, finding that he could not dispose of her head, had thrown it into a canal where it floated along. He was discovered and hanged. The crime left an impression in the crowded and poor neighborhood that seemed to haunt her permanently and may have added to her fear of life, her remoteness, her melancholy.†

She has often been described by persons who met her after she found her chosen milieu; and, as Violet Hunt has noticed, her brother-in-law William Michael enumerates her charms with distaste. Beautiful, he calls her, with an air of dignity and sweetness; but he finds her beauty too uncommon to appeal to everybody. Her air of reserve was perhaps the fear of a sensitive girl of her class being snubbed, a feeling that she had to be very careful of her speech and accent. Height, distinction of

* One of the brothers was feeble-minded, and according to Violet Hunt a sister too ended her days in an institution for the mentally afflicted.

† A brother, so the legend goes, bought the knife with which the murder was done, and showed it to the nervous little girl.

form with a long neck and regular yet unusual features, greenish blue eyes that seemed to look into a world where there was no light, a brilliant complexion so lovely in coloring that all her contemporaries remarked on it, and a heavy wealth of hair the color of newly burnished copper—these were some of her physical assets; but they did not explain the peculiar charm of her personality. She spoke with a clear, low, modulated voice that was all that was ladylike; but in moments of stress and anger it assumed a faint sibilance that seemed out of tone with her beauty and manner.

3

She was an immediate success. Millais used her as the model for his "Ophelia" where, corpselike and stiff-looking as a dainty overdressed wax doll under the weight of heavy brocaded garments, she floats on the green waters beside overhanging willows. There is a well known legend that in posing for this picture she had to lie in a large tub of water kept at even temperature by large lamps placed underneath. One day when the picture was nearly finished, the lamps went out; but the artist, absorbed in his work, went on with his painting. With her customary passivity and quiet, the young model went on posing. When Millais noticed her plight it was too late. She had contracted a severe cold that led to a serious illness. Her father (one of the few times when he appears in her history) threatened to sue Millais; whether he did sue, is unknown to biographers. Something of her peculiar, static, trancelike quality appears in this story.

Ruskin, who was enchanted with her, found after she began to study painting under Dante Gabriel's encouragement that he often preferred her paintings and water colors to Rossetti's. It is difficult for an American to judge the quality of her paintings, so few of them are in America; and her contemporaries

were divided on them. Ford Madox Brown thought well of them; Sir William Rothenstein, an excellent critic within his limitations, thought many of them very lovely. The few I have seen are delicate, waxed, stiff and refined, the drawing that of a very gifted, untaught, adolescent girl; but they are poetic and far from untalented. Like her poetry, they are really hauntingly good—but not good enough. One gets the impression of a Trilby overwhelmed by a very attractive Svengali. It is as if the rich force of Dante Gabriel's nature flowed toward her and inspired her unconscious hand and mind with a false vitality, for real vitality was always lacking in her. "Sadly she charm'd, and dismally she pleas'd," Mrs. Troxell, one of the Rossetti biographers, says of her, quoting Sir Richard Steele. This is not quite true, she had her gayety, her quiet jokes that pleased and amused Dante Gabriel, but she was almost always unwell, so unwell that his friend Barbara Leigh-Smith, a healthy, wealthy, intelligent woman who had a feeling for him herself, was able to dismiss poor Elizabeth by saying that she was really "too ill to be really pretty." But on most of her contemporaries (none of them on intimate terms with her) she left an indescribable impression of romance. John Ruskin's parents thought she looked like a countess, or rather looked the way a countess ought to look. When she made a visit to Oxford for her health, the saintly and famous Dr. Pusey and his mother the aristocratic Lady Lucy admired her drawings, her breeding, and her loveliness. So fond did he become of her that he tried to give her "some religion to die with"; and in this he somewhat succeeded, for the only religion she ever had, as the Rossetti ladies noted to their distress, was her occasional quotations from Dr. Pusey.

And so Elizabeth Siddal moved in that Pre-Raphaelite world closely observed, rarely observing, always arousing a keen interest that lent itself to legend when the time came. Probably

the most attractive description comes from Lady Burne-Jones. As young Georgiana Jones, she had first visited the Rossettis with her young husband Edward. The couple delighted in being allowed to call on the Master and were all too eager to worship before his legendary wife and model. Elizabeth's languid remoteness only added to the charm. She did not talk much; but one could look at her, and that was a pleasure. In later years, when the visitor had become Lady Burne-Jones and had seen many of the famous beauties of the day gather in her drawing room, she could still draw this evocative picture of Dante Gabriel's wife:

I see her in the little upstairs bedroom with its lattice window, to which she carried me when we arrived, and the mass of her beautiful deep-red hair as she took off her bonnet: she wore her hair very loosely fastened up, so that it fell in soft, heavy wings. Her complexion looked as if a rose tint lay beneath the white skin, producing a most soft and delicate pink for the darkest flesh-tone. Her eyes were of a kind of golden brown—agate-colour is the only word I can think of to describe them—and wonderfully luminous: in all Gabriel's drawings of her and in the type she created in his mind this is to be seen. The eyelids were deep, but without any languor or drowsiness, and had the peculiarity of seeming scarcely to veil the light in her eyes when she was looking down.*

When Dante Gabriel entered the room and began to talk to her the sibilance died out of her voice, and she seemed restored to life. Even her reserve left her, and she became coy, coquettish, somewhat excited by his nearness.

She seemed to be cut away from her home and relatives and lived in the studios that Dante Gabriel or his friends left to her when they went away. Ruskin's pension sent her to Paris and to the mountains, to the sea, but she always returned to London and her painting, to long days of solitary reading in

* *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, Vol. 1, p. 208.

Dante Gabriel's studio, mysterious long spells of sickness. Visitors would often see her leaving the room as they entered, her queer flowing dresses looking so odd in that day of crinolined women. Ford Madox Brown had a vivid impression of her in Gabriel's studio on a chilly October day in 1854. He wrote in his journal, "Saw Miss Siddal looking thinner, and more deathlike and more beautiful and more ragged than ever." She invented her own style of dressing, strange as it then appeared; and, through her own stylized beauty and Rossetti's paintings, she set a fashion for literary and artistic circles that lasted into the next century and filled Bloomsbury, Chelsea, and New York's Greenwich Village with types that were unconsciously made up to resemble her. Horace Gregory, in a review of Violet Hunt's book, fixes the type as Americans knew it in the twenties:

We remember the rush of boys and girls to Greenwich Village, an emigration by scores and hundreds from the Pacific West, the Middle West, New England. Of these, we remember the girls especially; they were tall and wore long skirts or draperies of brightly colored batik or calico, and sandals on bare feet. This type was an imperfect memory of life imitating art and was something that resembled a Bohemian tradition. Its origin dates back more than a half century, back to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in Victorian London, back to the sacred inner circle of the group, until at last we see "The Blessed Damozel," "Beata Beatrix," the white throat, fiery hair, Elizabeth Siddal, the wife of Rossetti.*

Through Violet Hunt we also catch the hidden undertones of gossip about Rossetti's wife and model, the overtones dying into undertones, the intimate comments exchanged between Pre-Raphaelite wives in Kensington or Campden Hill when prosperity, age, and success had robbed them of imaginative sympathy. It is clear that Violet Hunt (herself a daughter of the Pre-Raphaelites) really dislikes Gabriel and enjoys pa-

* "The Rossettis at Home," *Nation*, Vol. 135, p. 568 (Dec. 7, 1932).

tronizing his wife. The fact that Elizabeth Siddal *appeared* to be a lady, that she spoke and acted like one, really annoys her, though she never gives any rational explanations—it is only a vague spiritual disturbance, an irrational anger, arising from some obscure uneasiness in the soul.

Poor Dante Gabriel! one hears Violet Hunt saying. His taste in women was so low, usually large blonde vulgar women of the people, rather on the plump side like the opulently curved Fanny Cornforth or Annie Miller. It is true that Elizabeth Siddal was an exception and so was Jane Morris, but Dante Gabriel's life was always divided between the Flesh and the Spirit, the Dream and the necessary Reality, and the conflict was symbolized between his mistresses and the women he really loved and worshiped. Unfortunately, this was a side of Gabriel that Elizabeth Siddal never recognized or would admit and it led to the ultimate tragedy.

Living in Rossetti's flat on Chatham Place up four flights of stairs, seeing almost no one, she can then be imagined reading, painting, writing poetry. Whenever Dante Gabriel appeared she would be ready to sit for twenty-four hours at a stretch. The sacrifice of her life was complete, yet all agreed that she remained chaste—she was holding out for marriage. She seemed to be rejected by her own family, and Christina, Maria, and Old Antique,* the mother of the Rossettis, refused to acknowledge her existence. In Violet Hunt's attitude we can see or feel something of Christina's attitude to her future sister-in-law. For Christina's attitude seemed to be the most rigid of all. Old Mrs. Rossetti was courtly and high-minded enough to show politeness from time to time, if nothing else. Maria, deep in the religious reveries that were leading her to the Anglican convent where she finally ended her days, showed some hesitant Christian charity; but Christina's attitude toward her future sister-

* Dante Gabriel's nickname for his mother.

in-law seemed to hold a neurotic pattern. Certainly it held a touch of latent cruelty that seems incompatible with her character—that is, if one does not look too deeply.

4

As we can see, it was natural enough for Christina and Elizabeth Siddal to meet and draw apart. But the tragedy of the situation was that it made a coolness between Christina and that favorite brother who was in her eyes the head of the family and the hope and stay and sole encourager of her own gifts through that dark period when, without doubting them, she had doubted her ability to win recognition. And there were reasons, reasons that she might not have acknowledged to herself. For instance, there were her gifts so firm and certain, so much her life that she sometimes identified them with her religion. They had been received so slowly, while Elizabeth Siddal, "flighty" as William Michael thought her, shrill-voiced, languid, could turn out her little verses, her small paintings, and receive such easy acclaim! Something of the contempt of the true artist for the half-artist, of the passionate woman who had renounced love for the woman to whom love was offered easily, and who took it languidly, must have moved Christina. And Dante Gabriel was almost defiantly tactless. When she was taking drawing lessons from Ford Madox Brown he had warned her that it was useless to try to rival "The Sid" in painting. When Christina, aroused to a quiet, determined competitiveness that she must have felt was unchristian (for we see no signs of this trait before or after), began to write about three poems a day and to send them to Gabriel as usual, he wrote to her that Allingham, the young Irish poet whose opinion was valued by all of them, had seen Elizabeth's poems and was delighted by them!

Christina's attempts at visiting her brother when Elizabeth

Siddal was sitting for him became difficult. She would sit very stiffly saying a few words in her beautiful low voice with its undertones of musical precision. Elizabeth, leaning back in an armchair or on the sofa, would say even less, or with eyes half closed would break into some shocking flippancy or perhaps some slangy irrelevance. Christina would then take out her knitting—she seemed forever “working at worsted”—and survey this changeling from the slums with her brilliant hazel eyes; and under their heavy lids the fire of repressed cruelty would glow and linger; for, as Violet Hunt has observed, there was more passion in Christina’s little finger than in all of Elizabeth’s long slim body.

From time to time, Christina’s conscience reproached her; we hear of efforts toward friendliness, but it all led to nothing: the antipathy was too deep, its sources were too remote. Indeed, the Rossetti women and the kind courteous William found Elizabeth a trial. Secretly they may have hoped for a better marriage for their fascinating son and brother with his great gifts and his growing fame. This sick girl, if not immoral, almost gave one the impression of being immoral. They doubted her orthodoxy in religion, they doubted her ability to make Dante Gabriel happy—and there they were not far from wrong. But they made Elizabeth Siddal self-conscious, and she was not at her best with them. They suspected her cultured mannerisms, they suspected her voice, they were indifferent to her good looks, and rather indifferent to her poetry and painting. Artistically and educationally destitute, frivolous, trivial, and sometimes slangy (Christina, Maria, and Mrs. Rossetti did speak such a pure English)—what could they say to her?

Christina on her calls, elegant in her severe almost shabby dark clothes, would sit upright, rigid in her high-backed chair, and go on with her knitting. When she heard of Dante Gabriel’s long delayed wedding, she waited for some time, and then sent

her new sister-in-law a waste-paper basket as a belated wedding present.

5

It would have interested Christina to know what Allingham (whose praise of Elizabeth's poems was not as great as her brother said it was) wrote in his journal about Elizabeth after her spell had been removed from the world of the living:

Short, sad, and troubled her life, it must have seemed to her like a troubled dream. She was sweet, gentle, and kindly, and compassionate, sympathetic to art and poetry. . . . Her pale face, abundant red hair, and long thin limbs were strange, affecting—never beautiful in my eyes.

Nothing is here said about her poems and paintings—and Gabriel had been showing Allingham some of her paintings. But Allingham saw her with a man's eyes, and the male opinion is all in her favor.

Christina wrote a poem which she put away and did not publish in her lifetime; but the impression of the face that haunted her brother's studio is not unsympathetic. It is only in the last line that we feel the sting. "In an Artist's Studio" is the title, and it is one of the few poems in which she wrote down her impressions of Elizabeth: 2

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans;
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel—every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,

And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
 Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
 Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
 Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
 Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

"Not as she is, but as she fills his dream." Even in these lines which seem to withhold praise, Christina too pays tribute to Elizabeth Siddal's power to evoke dreams, the dreams, the evocative power which her brother described in a richer sonnet that he called "Sibylla Palmifera": //

Under the arch of Life, where love and death,
 Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw
 Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,
 I drew it in as simply as my breath.
 Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath,
 The sky and sea bend on thee,—which can draw,
 By sea or sky or woman, to one law,
 The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.

This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise,
 Thy voice and hand shake still,—long known to thee
 By flying hair and fluttering hem,—the beat,
 Following her daily of thy heart and feet,
 How passionately and irretrievably,
 In what fond flight, how many ways and days!

6

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal and Dante Gabriel Rossetti celebrated their long delayed marriage on the 23rd of May, 1860. The many years of waiting for the marriage lines had not been beneficial to Elizabeth's health or spirits. In the one daguerreotype we have of her, truth undisguised by art tells a tale candidly, and we see her as she must have appeared when not sitting under the Arch of Life, as Dante Gabriel would have

it, or as the personification of the Lady Beauty. Beautiful and strange she is even in the dim daguerreotype, and we see the same long eyelids, the long throat, the shadowing hair that live in her husband's pictures. But there is a look of querulousness, of shrewishness even around the unusual eyes, around the full lips. This was the Elizabeth that Christina may have seen only too often.

Dante Gabriel's announcement of the marriage to his family had an offhand air: "Like all important things I have ever meant to do—to fulfill duty or secure happiness—this one has been deferred almost beyond possibility." The statement might well have drawn cold or troubled glances from the ladies in Albany Street or sighs of unhappy resignation. But then outwardly all was quiet courtesy, for they were great ladies, Maria, Mrs. Rossetti the mother, and Christina. Their poise, their dignity, their impeccable manners were noted by all who met them. Did they know, as Elizabeth must have known, that Dante Gabriel was already unfaithful to her, and that Fanny Hughes (afterward Cornforth) of the corn-gold hair and luscious curves and the commonest of accents was already somewhere in the background? However, Elizabeth had her moment of happiness—or was it security, or respectability? She was attached to her husband in her detached way and a ray of brightness enters her little poems.

Love held me joyful through the day,
And dreaming ever through the night:
No evil thing could come to me,
My spirit was so light.

But her consumption—at least, they all said it was consumption—seemed to be in an advanced stage, and now neuralgia racked her. It was noticed again as Georgiana Jones had noticed, that only her husband's presence could soothe her, but the light of

his presence was often withdrawn from her. Healthy, masculine, vivid, full of animal power and creative energy, he could not always endure the presence of this sick melancholy girl. She was again left alone in the apartment that they had so enjoyed redecorating when they were first married. The drawing room was hung completely around with her drawings, and on the dining-room walls were tall trees and fruit of Dante Gabriel's design, "printed on brown and blue paper in rich tones of Venetian red, black, and yellow."

Elizabeth continued her painting after marriage, and her husband wrote to Allingham that her new designs would surprise and delight him. "If she only had better health!" he lamented. "She will I am sure paint such pictures as no woman painted yet." The pity and tenderness in his love for her, he had expressed long before he married her:

It seems hard to me when I look at her sometimes working, or too ill to work, and think how many without a tithe of her genius or greatness of spirit have abundant health and opportunities to labor through . . . while perhaps her soul is never to bloom nor her bright hair to fade but after hardly escaping from degradation and corruption all she might have been must sink out again unprofitably in that dark house where she was born.

She was at work on a little drawing called "The Haunted Tree" which Ruskin admired immensely though he urged her to forgo ghostly themes. The sunnier side of life, however, was not in her line. Too delicate, tenuous, and pathetic, her verses remind us of the early Christina rather than Dante Gabriel:

The river ever running down,
Between the grassy bed,
The voices of a thousand birds,
That clang above my head,

Shall bring me to a sadder dream,
When this sad dream is dead.

or:

A silence falls upon my heart,
And hushes all its pain,
I stretch my hand in the long grass
And fall to sleep again
There to lie empty of all love
Like beaten corn of grain.

or:

Then who shall close my lady's eyes,
And who shall fold her hands?
Will any hearken if she cries,
Up to the unknown lands?

The last lines and the mood of this poem must have lingered in Christina's memory when ten years later she wrote her sonnet under the title "They Desire a Better Country," beginning "What seekest thou, far in the unknown land?" But at that time Christina was at the height of her powers, and her magnificent sonnet eclipses Elizabeth's poem and reduces it to silence.

Marriage did not rob Elizabeth Siddal of her elusiveness. Like St. Francis of Assisi she might have said, "*Secretum meum mihi.*" Her secret always remained her own, and she was not the conventional Victorian wife that the Rossetti women would have wished for Gabriel. Victorian marriages like Victorian furniture were made to last, and often had a solid impressiveness that seemed formidable and yet admirable. English writers and artists of the period (to the surprise of their French confrères) sometimes carried this ideal of marriage to heights

of romantic extravagance. The soberer aspect of marriage was best eulogized by the Laureate himself, who drew the ideal matron as it were from his own fireside, for it was his own mother that he described in "Isabel":

The intuitive decision of a bright
And thorough-edged intellect to part
Error from crime; a prudence to withhold;
The laws of marriage character'd in gold
Upon the blanched tablets of her heart.

He also prescribes "an accent very low in blandishment," a hatred of gossip, small talk, and frivolities, and "a courage to endure and to obey." One feels sometimes that the key to Victorian marital happiness lay in "fortitude," but that the fortitude was a very one-sided affair, solely a feminine prerogative. Yet marital happiness and true devotion are not so common that we can afford to laugh at them, and the Victorian age, by demanding paragons of domestic virtue, often produced them. One remembers the wife of the frail Sydney Dobell who, though in delicate health herself, slept on a mat outside the poet's door for months when he was very ill; and Coventry Patmore's first wife, "the Angel in the House," who wore herself out in what Sir Edmund Gosse has called rather impatiently "domestic ceremonial"; and Mrs. Charles Kingsley, who, after her husband's death, always slept with his photograph pinned to the next pillow; * and even Mrs. Tennyson, so humble, so doting, so self-effacing before the Laureate's genius that his old friend "Rubaiyat" FitzGerald wrote in a very private letter (of course he was a bachelor) that it was no wonder that Tennyson's verse

* After relating this anecdote in her journal the irreverent Alice James wrote, "As the last expression of refined sentiment could anything be more grotesquely loathsome?" Mrs. Kingsley's friends thought otherwise.

was losing some of "that old champagne flavor": "He is sunk in coterie worship and (I tremble to say it) in the sympathy of his most ladylike and gentle wife."

From these altitudes of domesticity Dante Gabriel and his wife were utterly remote; and Christina and Ruskin, who rather (out of their profound inexperience) approved of the altitudes, were both troubled and amazed. Ruskin wrote them letters full of tendernesses and scoldings: "You are such absurd creatures both of you. I don't say you don't seem to know what is wrong but just do whatever you like as far as possible—as puppies and tomtits do." This was not fair to Elizabeth, whose morals were always regulated by her low energy and natural fastidiousness and the painfully learned caution of her class. But he was perfectly right about Dante Gabriel, who was not one of those who arise, and fly from "The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;—or who move upward and onward, Working out the beast, And let the ape and tiger die." He was too true a Latin for that, and his religion was often one of primitive fears and superstitions. But he sinned first and repented long afterward. Ruskin, who was always uneasy toward him (his affection and admiration tinged with awe and fear), wrote shortly after Dante Gabriel's marriage: "There are many things in which I have always acknowledged your superiority to me. There are other things in which I just as simply know that I am superior to you. I don't mean writing. You write as you paint better than I." He meant one supposes that he possessed moral superiority but it was the kind of superiority that would leave Dante Gabriel unimpressed. It was obvious that Ruskin's favorite was Ida—as he renamed Elizabeth after the Tennysonian princess. He liked the quickness with which she greeted him and the "queenly kiss" she gave him when he came to congratulate her on the wedding. Silent with others, she found speech and even vivacity in Ruskin's and

Swinburne's presence. It was as if the two men (who both seemed to suffer from a sexual impediment) struck a chord in her. Her husband was never so much a poet as when he painted her; but when he painted Fanny Hughes his painting took on strength, vitality, and new qualities as *painting*.

8

Alone, ailing, with no companion (because now her husband was almost always out of the house) except a dove, that characteristic Pre-Raphaelite pet whose low croon only irritated Dante Gabriel, Elizabeth can be pictured brooding and melancholy with loneliness and neuralgia. Christina, Maria, and old Mrs. Rossetti rarely called, for by this time they more than suspected that she was bad for dear Dante Gabriel, they *knew*. Christina lacked the easy sentimentalism, the hypocrisies that so often went with the mid-Victorian virtues. In that respect alone she was not a conventional Victorian *religieuse*. But she was a great lady, and on the rare occasions when she met her sister-in-law the dark hazel eyes, smoldering with hidden fire, would fix the gray, limpid, unsparkling eyes of Elizabeth with a cold courtesy that saw through her little poems, her waxen paintings, her dream world where she walked as the blessed damozel among the stars and the lilies, to Cranbourn Alley, where she was revealed the little milliner sick, self-educated, uncertain, flighty, and so bad for Gabriel. If there were only friends among the people who surrounded Gabriel, and who noticed her because of Gabriel! Little Georgie Jones, so worshiping, so happy with her husband and baby, was not a real friend; and her husband worshiped Dante Gabriel too much to be sympathetic to his trying wife. Wonderful Jane Morris in her regal home-dyed flowing gowns of peacock-blue or warm red, with the long throat on which the gypsy beauty of the head and its wild dark hair seemed like the dark counterpart of Eliza-

beth's gold and white, was very kind to her and often invited her to the Morris home in Hammersmith. But Jane was really a commonplace woman, as her husband soon discovered but Dante Gabriel never—for it was beginning to be rumored that he was in love with her and she with him. It was all Arthurian and romantic, like a page out of Malory, dreamlike and unreal and out of the solid Victorian world. We hear of Elizabeth suddenly leaving the Morris house when she had gone there for a visit, and returning to Chatham Place without a penny in her purse or in the house.* Gabriel wrote to his mother in distress (he was as usual away from home) asking her to run over and lend her some money. Of course he would repay. The fact was that the Morrises were too rich for one so deeply immured in poverty as Elizabeth Siddal. She felt more cheerful, more comfortable in her own modest apartment, in her familiar solitude.

Jane Morris, walking among the medieval chairs and tables, the hand-hewn oaken chests, the peacock and dragon decorations, the hand-woven rugs dyed blood-red, bright orange, wild green-blue, seemed to long for some nice new suburban villa where everything would be cozier, more homelike. But she too had the wonderful gift of silence and letting her beauty take full effect on enraptured visitors, she appeared like a poem by her husband, like a picture by Rossetti. When Dante Gabriel's wife and William Morris's wife both attended a Pre-Raphaelite festival the effect was overwhelming.

We have a description of Elizabeth Siddal in the Morris home from a fellow guest at dinner there. Elizabeth, tall, wraithlike, almost haggard, glided in silently to dinner and took her place at the table with an abstracted and ghostly air. She seemed unearthly in her pallor, her fragility, her melancholy, her si-

* She had refused to accept the Ruskin pension any longer when she found that she was too ill to paint.

lence. Only her wonderful hair seemed alive in its rich coppery gold. After dinner she arose again almost as quietly and warmed her hands before the drawing-room fire. Seeing herself observed, she slipped away like a ghost. "A ghost in the house of the living"—thus he remembered her to the end of his life.*

Money was still scarce in spite of Dante Gabriel's growing reputation, and much of the little the Rossettis had was spent on doctors. Sometimes a doctor would become fascinated by their strange ménage and refuse to accept payment, feeling it a privilege to serve such remarkable people. Sometimes Ruskin would send his own doctor. But it was becoming difficult to find out just what illness was draining her life away. A child had miscarried, and the doctors had told her that it was doubtful if she could ever have another. Again the Rossetti women shrugged their shoulders. Incompetent, sterile, incapable, irreligious, a bad housekeeper, without God, without health. If only Gabriel had been wiser! But now she was sicker than ever, and another baby on the way. This time Dante Gabriel refused to believe her. Alone again in the huge bed with its faded heavy tapestry hangings embroidered with fruits and flowers, she listlessly mourned over the empty bassinet (was it ever to be filled?) that she had decorated so beautifully and listened to the excruciating (to everyone but herself) crooning of her pet dove. Shortly after the stillbirth of her baby she startled a visitor who looked at the bassinet by bursting into hysterical tears and crying, "Don't wake it, don't wake the baby!" Gabriel was annoyed; he felt that she was play-acting, and perhaps the visitor did too. Christina would certainly have disapproved of such behavior. And so, out of sheer narrowness, Christina and her mother and sister, without quarreling, left the poor girl to her fate. Here was certainly a situation for Christian sympathy. But they never pretended to an affection or a concern that they did not feel.

* Charles Ricketts in the *London Observer*, Oct. 14, 1928.

Christina and Maria had become Associates of the St. Mary Magdalén Home for Fallen Women, an institution founded by an Anglican sisterhood devoted to the rescue of such unfortunates. Christina had taken to wearing the habit of the order whenever she appeared at the Home, in Highgate. Mrs. William Bell Scott, who called on her there and saw her walking about the grounds with a bishop, showed a touch of malice when she described the habit as "a simple, elegant, black gown with hanging sleeves and a muslin cap, with a lace edging and veil very becoming to her." One wishes that Christina had spent that time with her sister-in-law, whose soul needed comfort, aid, and redemption too.

9

William Michael called on Elizabeth often and was very kind, but she must have felt that it was not from liking her. Ruskin did like her, but he was engrossed in his own pitiful love affair with a little girl, hardly of marriageable age.

Another friend was young Algernon Swinburne, who had come to admire Dante Gabriel and stayed to admire and revere her. Beauty alone would not have appealed to Swinburne; * and he saw more than beauty in this tall moody girl, a quality that moved him, that struck him as akin to himself. They were alike in their remoteness from this world, in their strange appearance, in their flaming-red hair, in the something so English in their character that it transcended class distinctions. In her sadness, strangeness, and mixture of sweetness and sarcasm she resembled the dream women of his songs, women drawn from Malory or the early French romances or the Old Testament who, gloriously appareled in the richest metaphors, moved in an atmosphere that was both hectic and strangely sexless:

* I have drawn many opinions in this chapter from Sacheverell Sitwell's beautiful and psychologically sound essay on Elizabeth Siddal in *The Dance of the Quick and the Dead*.

The winds that fold around,
Her soft enchanted ground
Their wings of beauty sadden into song.

10

Day after day when Dante Gabriel returned from a convivial evening or a lecture at the Working Men's College or a visit to Fanny Hughes Cornforth, he would find Algernon and Elizabeth sitting together in the drawing room, Elizabeth's chin cupped in her hand, her long eyelids drooping over a book they were both reading together. Or Algernon would give one of his amazing recitals of poetry which his hearers never forgot. He would recite his own poems sometimes standing on a chair,

"his body backwardly rigid, his voice rasping up to a note to vatic and falsetto ecstasy, his arms pressed rigidly to his side, his hands working upward and downward with stiff down-pointing fingers and with the extricating gestures of a man seeking to push himself up and out of some imprisoning quicksand." *

Sometimes he would close his left eyelid—a mannerism that no one could account for; or after a reading suddenly he would stand erect with a rigid, inhuman intensity.

Dante Gabriel found Algernon very amusing—till he discovered that Elizabeth who was taking drugs to numb the pains of neuralgia and was sometimes not responsible for her dazed remarks, "flighty" and more calculated to make an impression than convey a fact, had made a confidant of him. After her miscarriage she somehow had given Swinburne and others the impression that but for Gabriel's treatment of her the child

* For an account of Swinburne's readings see Harold Nicolson, *Swinburne*, p. 52.

would have been alive. This story may have arisen after one of her innumerable hysterical quarrels with Dante Gabriel, rumors of which reached Christina.

Violet Hunt says that, less out of mischief than out of the desire to shock people, Swinburne had repeated the story (with elaborate variations) to Monckton Milnes, himself a fine artist in gossip. Rossetti was compelled to take steps to stop this story, and Swinburne, confronted with his mischief-making, offered wild and profuse apologies. But the friendship between Swinburne and the Rossettis continued. Dante Gabriel as always was generous; he waved aside the apologies and forgave everybody. No doubt Elizabeth had received a scolding, which in her morbid state may have led to another quarrel with her husband and still another quarrel. Perhaps he warned her of careless talk, of behaving in too unconventional a manner; for Dante Gabriel, a born Bohemian himself, had momentary lapses of demanding Victorian standards of correct behavior from his wife. It all led to the final tragedy; and the prelude to that tragedy was the dinner in the French restaurant off Cranbourn Alley where Deverell had first discovered her in the millinery shop.

It would be unjust to say that they were always quarreling, always unhappy. There were moments when Elizabeth and Dante Gabriel made enchanted appearances before their world and left an impression of romance, affection, and personal magic. There were moments of pet names and foolish jokes, and moments when they were both painting and he praised her work and made her happy. These were the moments that Dante Gabriel liked to remember afterward when he found it possible to think of her and their life together at all, those moments

Which stored apart is all love hath to show,
For heart-beats and for fire-heats long ago.

On a June evening a few months before Elizabeth's death Mary Howitt, the Quaker author of children's tales, wrote in her journal of a great Pre-Raphaelite "crush" to which she had been invited. The party could not have taken place at the Rossettis' small Chatham Place apartment, but may have been at the home of a richer member, William Morris, or Boyce, or perhaps at the home of one of the wealthy art patrons who had already begun to invest in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. The sober smoky mid-Victorian gloom was lit as if with a torch, and Mary Howitt sitting awkward and unnoticed has left a memorial of that moment with a vividness that is almost Pre-Raphaelite art itself. She describes the guests and the beauty of the rooms, suggesting some medieval fantasy—which was exactly the effect the Pre-Raphaelites wished to produce, for their whole movement was a revolt against the ugliness and brutality of the world around them, and they hoped through their art to build a world of fantasy and romantic beauty to counteract it. Mary Howitt wrote down her awe-struck wonder:

Their pictures covered the walls and their sketch books the tables. The uncrinolined women with their wild hair which was very beautiful, their picturesque dresses and rich colourings looked like figures out of some Pre-Raphaelite picture.

It was indeed very dreamlike and unreal as if the gas-lit, smoke-belching world outside had been exorcised out of existence. But as she watched "the gorgeous and fantastic" forms moving about she felt drab, colorless, and unable to participate in all this riot of richness, wildness, and color. "They all seemed so young and kindred to each other that I felt out of place." Turning over the pages of Dante Gabriel's sketchbook she may have seen~~s~~ through her dazzled, modestly veiled eyes, handsome tall Mrs. Millais always dressed for festivities in that primrose-yellow satin that her husband loved best, or Elizabeth

in that scarlet and olive-green in which she had sat for Beatrice, her golden hair aflame in the shadow of a thousand lights, or Mrs. William Morris glimmering in the peacock-blue brocades which she so often affected, or perhaps Christina Rossetti (for she occasionally attended these affairs) remote and severely distinguished in her favorite dove-colored silk wreathed with black lace that one observer remembered her wearing at another Pre-Raphaelite gathering of that period. And then there were the men, young, eager, impatient for success: Ford Madox Brown with his golden beard and great height; Holman Hunt with his snub nose and dedicated air; Millais, princely and elegant and already on the road to popular success; the new poet who was beginning to rival Tennyson in esoteric circles, Robert Browning, dark, energetic, with a loud guttural voice; William Bell Scott before bitterness and failure had soured his generous temper; and handsome young William Allingham who always looked like a knight out of some Celtic legend.* These and many others must have passed before Mary Howitt's eyes; and, though she did not know it, in their heat and youthful passion and violent color they were ushering in the last period of the Victorian age, that blending of nervous sensibility, that secret sense of coming evil that was to be known as the *fin de siècle* and was to end the century. But this was the golden hour of the Pre-Raphaelites, before complete success had tarnished or defeat soured them. To be young and alive then was very heaven!

William Allingham in his journals looking back at that time seemed touched with a sense of inspired elegy, and when he spoke of the past it was *this* past that he meant: "I care for my old diaries for the sake of the past, the old sacred happy past, whose pains, fears, sorrows have put on the calms of eternity. Mysterious past for ever real whose footsteps I see on every page invisible to other eyes."

* My descriptions of these people are drawn mainly from Violet Hunt's reminiscences.

Something of this vision he handed down before his death to his young countryman William Butler Yeats, whose Pre-Raphaelite roots have never been fully acknowledged. And Allingham in a few of his haunting lyrics full of Irish folklore, Irish landscape, lyrics marked by the wailing undertone of the Gaelic folksong, was one of the forerunners of the Celtic revival, through whose beginnings ran a stronger strain of Pre-Raphaelite mysticism and vision than has ever been admitted. It may be true that the Pre-Raphaelites by turning their backs on the modern world led a backward-looking revolution; but their values were true Romantic values, and they struck dim archaic subconscious sources of artistic and poetic meaning—common longings for the beautiful, the mysterious, the wonderful, and the terrifying—that have no time or place but are the primal sources of poetic emotions. When poetic activity has gone too far from these sources, a period of aridity follows, and then a return to the sources.

11

Shall Time not still endow
One hour with life, and I and she
Slake in one kiss the thirst of memory?

So Dante Gabriel wrote later in "The Stream's Secret," remembering such scenes of splendor as little Mary Howitt had transcribed, remembering also moments of almost happiness, moments of domestic—well, almost of domestic well-being.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth was growing more and more haggard and hollow-eyed, and Dante Gabriel, though he still retained his splendid eyes and golden voice, was growing stouter—too stout; and his vitality exhausted poor Elizabeth. His splendid vigor seemed to drain her of the little life and vitality she had left, and yet she could no longer conceive of a world without him, of existing without him. Well might Rossetti mourn:

Lo! Love, the child once ours; and Song, whose hair
Blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath;
And Art, whose eyes were worlds by God found fair.

She too whose eyes had once supplied the light that had poured magic over Art, Poetry, and Love was writing her little verses:

Life and death are falling from me.
Lord, have I long to go?
Hollow hearts are always near me,
Soulless eyes have ceased to cheer me.
Lord, may I come to Thee?

"O God, remember me!" she had cried, and we feel with her that the anguish could not be prolonged. The time had come, and when it came their friends were surprised that it had not happened sooner.

12

It was a chill slippery February evening when Algernon Swinburne, Dante Gabriel and Elizabeth went out to dine at the new French restaurant La Sablonnière. Swinburne had discovered this restaurant and was very enthusiastic about it: it reminded him of Paris, and had the real atmosphere. Like Mary Stuart, Elizabeth might have taken her motto for this last evening "In my end is my beginning." Did she remember that the restaurant was near Cranbourn Alley where young Walter Deverell (now dead!) had discovered her in the millinery shop? But all these early memories seemed like memories of a world seen before her birth. Since then she had learned new ways of feeling, of thinking, of being. She had as usual been unwell that day, and Gabriel preferred restaurants to dinners at home; no doubt Elizabeth's cooking left much to be desired, and they were not rich enough for a cook or any servants, save a daily

charwoman. Restaurants were still new and exciting—very continental and Bohemian, they seemed.

To fortify herself against her painful nerves, her chronic indigestion, Elizabeth had taken a dose of laudanum, and her half-dazed manner annoyed Gabriel, who said some sharp words to her on the way to the restaurant. To make matters worse Swinburne, waiting for them at the restaurant, was decidedly, quietly, nervously drunk. The waiters must have noticed them; it was impossible not to notice Elizabeth and Swinburne, and their odd appearance brought smiles to the other diners.* The intoxication of wine and poetry as always clung to Swinburne. Elizabeth in her drugged state could only nod her head mechanically as in a dream. Her red hair added to her startling appearance, and Swinburne, whose hair was almost as red as hers, made their historic appearance at La Sablonnière a very strange one. Rossetti was tired; perhaps he longed for Fanny Cornforth's simple, hearty, and very un-French dinners. Her healthy unaffected vulgarity was always a relief; it suited him in certain moods, and her plump golden Titian warmth must have seemed like June sunshine on this February scene. Very soon Swinburne left, and Rossetti took his wife home in a hansom cab. He was silent with boredom and anger, and she with drugs and unhappiness.

Slowly the horses went down the gas-lit streets across dark Pimlico shining with ice and snow under the moon. Street after street, and the pounding of the horses across the lonely evening pavements. There was the dark river chilly with melting snow and their apartment in Chatham Place again. He dropped her at the apartment and then told her he had an appointment at the Working Men's College. She thought, as many of his friends did afterwards, that he was going to Fanny Cornforth's and not to the College. Neighbors heard her pleading with him (so

* I have followed Sacheverell Sitwell's poetically valid re-creation of this scene.

the legend says), afraid to face herself alone again in empty rooms. "Stay with me—oh, stay with me." Then, someone remembered, she suddenly broke into another voice—the shrill slum-child's voice that Christina, Maria, and stately mother Rossetti had perhaps only suspected. She referred to her pregnancy—the pregnancy that Dante Gabriel refused to believe in, for had not her doctor said that he thought her incapable now of having children? "Go then," she cried, "and you will kill this child as you have killed the last." The very scandal that Swinburne had spread. He left her in anger, and her loud sobs were heard over the bannisters. When he returned late at night he found her dying from an overdose of laudanum. Later Ford Madox Brown was to tell of a slip of paper pinned to her night-gown saying that her life was so miserable that she wished no more of it. He (so the story went) destroyed the paper, and friends and neighbors helped to bring in a coroner's jury of accidental death. The Rossetti ladies kept their frozen silence and did not go to the funeral, but old Mrs. Rossetti turned over the family vault for the burial.

To Elizabeth in her coffin, beautiful and pale and passive as in her portrait as Ophelia, Rossetti tiptoed in softly, furtively, and made what he thought was his final, his great act of expiation. Under the head with its glowing hair he put a thick gray notebook with red edges in which he had been writing his poems, the poems which he had felt would make him even better known as a poet than as a painter. He did not look at her; but William Michael, who did look at her cold calm face, felt that she had again eluded them all. Now that she was dead, she was indeed the Beata Beatrix, the blessed damozel, mythical, haunting them all.

Swinburne defended her all his life long, and loyally tried to hush all scandal. In a eulogy in purest Swinburnese he wrote: "It is impossible that even the reptile rancour, the omnivorous

malignity of Iago himself could have dreamed of casting a slur on the memory of this incomparable lady."

Later, when Dante Gabriel sent some of poor Elizabeth's poems to Christina, her answer showed an understanding that was harsh but not without sympathy for him: "How full of beauty they are but how painful—how they bring poor Lizzie before one, voice, face and manner." But neither the voice nor the face nor the manner had ever pleased her. "*Intellectus humanus lumen siccum non est*"—the light of the human intellect is colored by interest and passion; and her interest and passion had been her brother's welfare. He too had begun to take drugs—hadn't Elizabeth introduced him to the relaxations and consolations of drug taking? She would be honest, but she would never deviate from the strictest honesty. Elizabeth dead, she and her brother seemed to draw together again. The old intimacy was restored.

Dante Gabriel's great tribute to his wife, the "Beata Beatrix," finished a year after her death, hangs in the Tate Gallery.* Since it is not now the fashion to speak too well of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, let Evelyn Waugh, one of the least naïve of modern writers, repeat what he has said of this picture in one of his best and least read books:

It is, perhaps, the most purely spiritual and devotional work of European Art since the fall of the Byzantine Empire. This statement is offered as a considered judgment and not as an ecstatic outburst. Anyone who, confronted with its sublime and pervasive sanctity, can speak of it coldly in terms of saturation, and planes and plastic values . . . has constricted his artistic perceptions to an antlike narrowness.†

There in the Tate Gallery before a generation that has seen horrors unutterable, and death in multiple forms, Elizabeth

* Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works*, p. 130.

† An inferior copy is in the Art Institute of Chicago.

Eleanor Siddal still lives in the "Beata Beatrix," her long eyelids half closed, half opening on eternity. Her flowing robes are a harmony of green and rose and purple. A crimson dove is bringing her the gray poppy of death and oblivion. She who had been "a ghost in the house of the living" took on a living force, a vitality after her death.

But Dante Gabriel, from the time of her death, seems to have been dogged by weariness, remorse, drugs and the corroding despair that had destroyed Coleridge, with the sloth that is the result of that despair. He might indeed have said with Coleridge whom he admired:

Sloth-jaundiced all! and from my graspless hand
Drop Friendship's precious pearls, like hour-glass sand.
I weep, yet stoop not! the faint anguish flows,
A dreamy pang in Morning's feverish doze.

As we have seen, Christina, her mother and sister left no written or spoken record of their feelings. They may not have believed that Elizabeth had committed suicide. But Christina had her own ideas of how the dead were to be spoken of, and in one of her later devotional works she expresses what may have been her feelings:

The day of judgment when we must all stand face to face not only with our Judge, but equally with each other. . . . It is no light offence to traduce the dead, to blacken recklessly their memory, to cultivate no tenderness for them, helpless and inoffensive as they now lie, with all their sins of omission or commission on their heads, . . . to court and blaze abroad every tittle of evidence which tells against them, to turn a dull ear, and lukewarm heart, to everything which tells in their favor. . . . Charity rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.

The blessed damozel was dead, the Victorian saint could now try to appease her "flighty" sister-in-law's soul with prayer,

and with what self-reproach? Unknowingly, as Elizabeth Siddal lay in the helplessness of death Christina herself became the blessed damozel of the Pre-Raphaelites, for her poetry was their first popular success and triumph. Elizabeth's pitiful legend began to sound like a poem that Christina might have written. After all, the Pre-Raphaelite cause at that moment needed something more than poor lovely Lizzie. It needed a blessed damozel whose strength of spirit and creative intensity carried through its silver-soft sweetness a vein of iron. For in spite of the old proverb, the battle is usually won by the strong, and the rewards of the race are almost always to the swift.

CHAPTER SIX



*The Two Brothers and Maria—
“The Prince’s Progress”
(1862–1870)*

WITH the death of Elizabeth Siddal, Dante Gabriel and Christina drew close again; uninterrupted now their talk about his work, her new poems, they had their little jokes and puns—things were almost what they had been. Almost, alas!—for there was Fanny Cornforth, whom Christina may have seen but never noticed; there were the drugs that Dante Gabriel had begun to take, having learned the habit from his wife. The worst was over, and she could respect the patient helplessness of the dead. Never again would she mention Elizabeth’s name save in luke-warm kindness, giving justice where justice was due, and no more. When Gabriel sent her some of his wife’s poems three years after her death, Christina wrote that she thought publication would be unjustifiable—perhaps feeling that they were too personal and some of the bitterer poems would bring secret scandal into the open. She also said that she found them too painful, too morbid. Christina, who had often been accused of excessive melancholy bordering on morbidity, was to admit that Elizabeth’s poems were too melancholy for her; and she was right in her criticism, for Elizabeth’s poems carry their weight of agony, but bring no catharsis because of their incomplete artistry.

It was best not to recall his lost wife to her brother, for she knew that in spite of loss, estrangement, and death there had been love. Nor did she ever, either in her letters or in her verse, tell if she had known of the strange scene in Highgate Cemetery where seven and a half years after Elizabeth's death that Pre-Raphaelite villain Charles Augustus Howell stood beside her grave.

Howell—an Anglo-Portuguese described by Whistler, who admired him because he feared him, as "the wonderful man, the genius, the Gil-Blas-Robinson-Crusoe hero born out of his time, the creature of top-boots and plumes, splendidly flamboyant"—Howell had urged Dante Gabriel, when he began to be afraid that his eyesight was failing and his paintings would have to be given up and only his poetry would be left, that the poems ought to be taken away from the dead. Why let the dead keep what would delight the living? Howell knew how to approach the authorities, how to overcome Dante Gabriel's superstitions and all legal difficulties. It was true that Dante Gabriel and his friends remembered fragments of the poems. Many friends could recite them if only to prove that they were in on a romantic secret—that they remembered the poems that were buried in the grave, the poems that would never be published.

At last Dante Gabriel gave permission, the poems *must* be published after all; but he also ordered that his mother, to whom the vault belonged, should not know of his action. It is doubtful whether, at the time, Maria or Christina knew. We know that William Michael learned of it afterward.

The legal difficulties were at last overcome. On a damp October night a fire was lit beside the grave, and the coffin was drawn to the surface. When the lid was opened it was noticed that in the rose glare of the midnight fire Elizabeth Siddal seemed unmarred by death, and still as beautiful as when she had been placed in the coffin. Henry Virtue Tebbs, at that time a proctor

at Doctors’ Commons, was the only other person who represented Dante Gabriel at the exhumation. He remembered that as the small book containing the poems was lifted from the folds of her red gold hair that had grown longer and stronger in the dim damp of the grave, some of the hair came out with the book and clung to it. The book, though soaked through, seemed legible, and after it was saturated with disinfectants and dried leaf by leaf, it became legible enough for Dante Gabriel to copy the poems. The lock of golden hair that had come with the manuscript book, he kept. A friend said that Dante Gabriel tied it around the doorknob of his study as if it were a charm against complaining spirits and death-pale ghosts, with long-cold, shut eyelids. Superstition, grief, defiance, struggled within him. Again he left orders that under no conditions was he to be buried in Highgate Cemetery. Did he think, when he copied out one of the sonnets from that grave-stained book, of the long lock of red-gold hair, and all it seemed to say of that woman so fragile in life, so strong in death?

Even so much life hath the poor tress of hair
Which stored apart is all love hath to show,
For heart-beats and for fire-beats long ago;
Even so much life endures unknown, even where,
Mid change the changeless night environeth,
Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death.

2

It seemed at that moment that the future of poetry lay in the hands of Tennyson: first the exquisite, refined, almost wild, yet often maidenly early Tennyson; and then the domestic, refined, ethical Tennyson who still retained his smooth and silver line, sweet as the music of Mendelssohn. He was sometimes, we feel, less valued for his lovely Virgilian moments of pastoral beauty and serenity, his delicate, almost dainty imagery, than

for his moral grandeur and sense of propriety. He was The Poet, he was The Laureate, and never has a poet in comparatively recent times received such homage from the people and from the state. All was as Sir Edmund Gosse has described it in his life of Swinburne:

Propriety had prevailed. . . . British poetry had become a beautifully guarded park . . . our over-smoothly shaven lawns—where gentle herds of fallow deer were grazing, thrushes sang very discreetly, from the boughs of ancestral trees, and there was not a single object to be seen or heard which could offer the smallest discomfort to the feelings of the most refined mid-Victorian gentlewoman.

It was too early for the subaqueous music and deep sensual mysticism of Dante Gabriel's poems; not yet had Swinburne burst upon the Victorian scene with the shock of an unexpected dance of maenads upon vicarage lawns. The Victorian age had stepped into its second phase, the mid-Victorian, and was soon to feel in the Pre-Raphaelites the force that was to lead into the third and final phase, to the *fin de siècle*. The century that began with the raffish brilliant elegance of the Regency was to end in nerve-exhausted languor and prophetic forebodings of coming ill.

The Victorian age that also began with the extreme popularity of the feminine delicacy and sentimental graces of Felicia Hemans * (a popularizer of the popular Romantic school that stemmed from Tom Moore and the Byron of the lesser lyrics) and Letitia Landon (L. E. L.), her later rival, was to herald an outburst of women's poetry unequaled before in English literary history. The great Romantic poets were admired, were worshiped, but Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon were loved, and

* Tennyson's mother (who influenced her son's early taste) was a great admirer of Felicia Hemans.

they accustomed the public to looking for the new movements under feminine names. Their true successor was Elizabeth Barrett Browning who wrote elegies on Felicia and Letitia and who inherited their popularity. It was Christina, as has been noticed, who led the way for the richer (though not finer) talents of Rossetti and Swinburne, and later William Morris. Then she withdrew into the dull brown seclusion of the house in Albany Street and continued writing her poems. She was like one who had lit a thousand candles in a large ballroom and had then retired to her own quiet room remote from the noise and glitter of the assembly halls.

Dante Gabriel was prospering, his reputation as a painter was growing, William Michael was making a reputation as a critic, and Christina’s own poetry had made a modest success. Her face, as we see it in the portraits of the period, began to take on a look of serenity, distinction, confidence. Sometimes when the spring air flooded the grayness of her room, happiness, hope, desire again seemed to melt her heart, and again love did not seem so sad or remote:

For I have hedged me with a thorny hedge,
I live alone, I look to die alone.
Yet sometimes when a wind sighs through the sedge
Ghosts of my buried years and friends come back,
My heart goes sighing after swallows flown
On sometime summer’s unreturning track.

Or again:

Why should I seek and never find
That something which I have not had?

She had taken as her motto, her lifelong motto, “Grant me the lowest place.” Humility, one of the great Christian virtues, is not easily attained by the proud and too sensitive, but slowly

all the remaining years of her life Christina was to practice and at last truly to attain it. There was Maria's example.

Maria had become ever stronger and surer in her faith. Her religion had given her cheerfulness and strength. In a letter, Dante Gabriel noticed that she had indeed become the most cheerful member of the family. He admitted that their mother and William Michael had some measure of cheerfulness; but he could make no claims for Christina and himself. Melancholia had become a predominant trait in both of them. However, no one was so much loved, so much the center of every group, so much the prince of men whenever he appeared as Dante Gabriel. He had that rarest, most precious of human gifts, the gift of inspiring love and attachment even when he least deserved it. A natural magnetism shone through his gray-blue eyes, so much like Christina's. A melancholy and wild good humor not unmixed with coarse heartiness that somehow in him became an added charm, was what Dante Gabriel's admirers remembered most in after years when recalling his peculiar hold on them. Burne-Jones, who was always to live under the shadow of Dante Gabriel's spell, would try to analyze this charm and fail. Only he felt that around Gabriel laughing, talking, entering a room there was always a nimbus of pure gold as if he walked forever in an atmosphere of midsummer light.

Years later, the young William Butler Yeats heard the blind poet Philip Bourke Marston talk of the Rossetti he had known. "Why was he not some great exiled king so that we could have given our lives for him?" Some of this charm, some of this glow, though delicate, attenuated, muted but strong, belonged to Christina too, and it is in this period of her life that we feel it most. Though she shaded her candle and muted her light, and only the few who were privileged to know her felt that charm, they felt it strongly. A warmth entered her slightest lyrics and told of a heart that was more than ready to hope, to love again:

Fair fall the freighted boats which gold and stone
And spices bear to sea:
Slim gleaming maidens swell their mellow notes,
Love-promising, entreating—
Ah sweet but fleeting—
Beneath the shivering, snow-white sails.

But she turns from the vision, and the gray air of reality enters her verses:

My trees are not in flower,
I have no bower,
And gusty creaks my tower,
And lonesome, very lonesome, is my strand.

After his wife’s death, Dante Gabriel had removed to 16 Cheyne Walk in Chelsea, and there in “the plenitude of his powers” and fame he poured forth a lavish, memorable hospitality. The warmth and glow of the atmosphere drew even Christina, her mother, and the saintly Maria to his parties. It was indeed a privilege to attend them, and one can understand why even Maria dropped her labors on her book on Dante, or the textbook on arithmetic she was preparing, to attend Dante Gabriel’s cheerful gatherings. By this time, too, the Pre-Raphaelites had become more than a legend whose fame was spreading to America and the continent, and whose sayings and doings were commented on and copied by literary and fashionable London. They had become everything that was advance-guard and exotic in British art—they were fashionable at last.

A visitor to Dante Gabriel’s house in Cheyne Walk about 1863 would enter by a fine old gateway of seventeenth century ironwork and ascend a flight of stone steps to the street door. Outside was a beautiful but neglected garden—tidiness was not a part of Dante Gabriel’s nature. In June jessamine, roses,

and marigold mingled with weeds and thistles, Solomon's-seals, daisies and the blue irises so much admired by the Pre-Raphaelite ladies. An old-fashioned knocker in the form of a dragon adorned the front door.

When the host appeared and led the way to the sitting room, the guest was impressed first by his Italianate appearance. Though he had never been in Italy and never cared much for travel, yet his beautiful voice made one feel that one was in the presence of some rich nature, some glowing figure out of the Renaissance. "A great Italian born out of Italy," Ruskin called Dante Gabriel, as if to explain the exotic element that both repelled and attracted him. Only the American, Joaquin Miller, misled by Dante Gabriel's hearty manner and slangy ease, found him very British; but Miller was neither sensitive nor perceptive. What one saw at once was the noble forehead on which the thin dark hair curled slightly; the eyes wonderful and alive; the strongly marked nose with the wide nostrils; the sensual mouth covered by a dark brown mustache—a mustache too full and long to be attractive. And then one heard that voice again, mellow, sympathetic, powerful, enchanting. All who heard him tried to describe that voice. "I have never heard a voice," wrote Sir Edmund Gosse, "so fitted for poetical effect, so purely imaginative and yet in its absence of rhetoric so clear and various."

It is that beautiful voice that we hear in poems of his where a rare and subtle Italian music richer than Christina's, more intricate, less pure, sings through. We hear it in the rising and falling cadences of "The Staff and Scrip":

Her women, standing two and two,
In silence combed the fleece.

• The Pilgrim said, "Peace be with you,
Lady"; and bent his knees.
She answered, "Peace,"

Her eyes were like the wave within;
Like water-reeds the poise
Of her soft body, dainty thin;
And like the water’s noise
Her plaintive voice.

Again we hear it in the more intricate weaving music of “Love’s Nocturne,” where the music seems to be drawn from some submerged fountain, or best of all in the hypnotic melody of “The Stream’s Secret,” surely one of the strangest and loveliest things in English lyric poetry, if one can call this dark-textured, silver-timbred, exotic music in the English tradition:

Oh sweet her bending grace,
Then when I kneel beside her feet;
And sweet her eyes’ o’erhanging heaven; and sweet
The gathering folds of her embrace;
And her fall’n hair at last shed round my face
When breath and tears shall meet.

Yet in these poems one has the sense of that quality in Dante Gabriel that Gerard Manley Hopkins had noted when, commenting on “The Blessed Damozel,” he had said that through it all ran an overtone of strong masculinity that added force to the delicacy.

3

A visitor to the house in Cheyne Walk in 1864, the young Henry Treffry Dunn (later to be Rossetti’s assistant) looked around him with wonder and awe when he was ushered into the dazzling sitting room. And like Dr. Johnson, someone might have said to him, “Sir, you may well wonder,” for in the decoration of the house the Pre-Raphaelite dream took on symbolic and publicity value. The Pre-Raphaelite movement was, in one

form, to die off into interior decoration and book illustration. Mirrors of all sizes and shapes and of various designs lined the wall so that the visitor felt himself floating, walking through mirrors. Through mirror-reflected space in endless duplication, he saw the mantelpieces of Chinese black lacquer, and the Chinese panels with designs of birds, animals, flowers, and fruit in gold relief. On the other side of the grate were Dutch tiles, displaying their carefully pictured biblical subjects. In this lush confusion, Dunn noticed that the fire grate was a fine example of eighteenth century design and that the brass and iron fenders were of equally fine workmanship. An old cupboard near by displayed a beautiful collection of Spode. The little sofa whose panes were decorated with landscapes and figures of the Cipriani period seemed particularly beautiful. As he turned to admire it Dante Gabriel entered and filled the room with magic.

Dunn noticed that his host's hands were small and white, and that he dressed quietly and almost carelessly, but expensively. The young admirer was then admitted into the studio and was fortunate enough to see the famous picture of the "Lady Lilith" (the model had been Fanny Cornforth) in the very full flowering of her opulent beauty. In this picture Dante Gabriel immortalized Fanny as in the "Beata Beatrix" he raised his monument to Elizabeth Siddal. It is a hymn to life and to sensual love as the "Beata Beatrix" is a tribute to that spiritual and crepuscular beauty that he admired but could not attain. Dunn could not know all this; but if he did not notice the weak drawing he was lost in the splendid color that flowed from the sun-gold hair of Lilith, in the profusion of roses, in the various shadings of the poppies and foxgloves—the corals, the crimsons, the greens, the glittering glass and opening landscapes, of sun and shadow that seemed to flash from the picture.

Later Rossetti told Dunn the legend of Lilith and read him the poem he had written on the picture. There Lilith,

subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.
The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
Lo! as that youth’s eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.

He had already in this poem begun to confuse Fanny Cornforth with the image of his dead wife, for it was Elizabeth and not Fanny who was “subtly of herself contemplative.” Later, when Dunn came to know Fanny, he saw the picture again and noticed that the refinement of feature that Rossetti had given her was more in Rossetti’s mind than Fanny’s face. And the strangling golden hair was not only Fanny’s; it was also the long lock of red-gold hair that was to come up later with the death-stained manuscript from his wife’s grave.

Among the curiosities of the place that Dunn discovered was the collection of strange animals that made Rossetti’s house a museum and zoo combined. A great peacock displayed its plumes on the lawn and gave great annoyance to neighbors by its noises. A fallow deer, an elegant graceful creature, was added to the collection; overwhelmed by the peacock, it followed it up and down until it had stamped out every feather in the tail of the poor bird. Indoor pets consisted of monkeys and parrots. Rossetti was fond of telling how one Sunday as he leaned blissfully back in his chair listening to the bells of near-by St. Luke’s the parrot, who had been unusually morose,

suddenly broke the silence with the cry, "You ought to be in church now." Christina would not have been amused.

4

Christina, William Michael, Maria, and old Mrs. Rossetti continued to occupy the house at 166 Albany Street until the midsummer of 1867. In 1864 Margaret Polidori, the most gentle and self-effacing of the Polidori aunts, joined the family, renting two rooms upstairs until her death in 1867. The caged existence, the locked-up intellectual ardor faded away at last, died away in prayer and hysteria. Margaret Polidori was attacked in her last years by a nervous tremor and would fall into loud peals of long-continued unreasonable laughter, resembling, says William Michael Rossetti, the vocal gymnastics of a laughing hyena. In this atmosphere even the passionate devotion of Maria, the cold austerities of Christina, felt the need for human warmth and contact, and we even begin to hear of something resembling frivolities among the Rossetti sisters. Christina's circle of friends, or rather acquaintances, began to widen as her brother's fame and her own spread. We find her visiting the Coventry Patmores, who kept a smart literary salon attended by the most fashionable and promising young writers of the day. A few years before, the young poet Sydney Dobell had called on the Patmores and had been overwhelmed when the three other guests familiarly addressed by their poised young hosts had turned out to be Tennyson, Browning, and Ruskin. No doubt Christina was another attractive name for the Patmores at this time. The "ceremonial wifeliness" of Patmore's first Angel in the House, and Patmore's own striking appearance and personality, made an interesting recollection in later years. And beside the romantic-looking couple that the young Patmores were at this period, were their houseful of thoroughly disciplined, lovely

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children who were always proudly shown off to visitors, and
who uttered poetic remarks at appropriate moments.

In later years Patmore seemed far from sympathetic to the Pre-Raphaelites; and when he discovered the merits of Alice Meynell, who was also a co-religionist, he seemed reluctant to praise any other woman. No doubt Christina could forgive but not forget Patmore’s later conversion to the Catholic Church, and a silence seemed to grow up between them. Yet years later Christina was to tell Katharine Tynan how touched she had been when, calling on Patmore after his first wife’s death, she found him weeping surrounded by his small children.

On July 20, 1864, a poet then unknown was writing to his friend A. W. M. Baillie with a mild excitement: “When next I see you I have great things to tell. I have been introduced to Miss [Maria] and Miss Christina Rossetti.” * Unfortunately for Christina’s biographers he did not tell them in his letter. The party had been given by friends of his, the Gurneys, cultivated High Church people whose company Christina always found congenial.

One wishes that there were a further record of this meeting between the finest devotional poet of the nineteenth century Church of England and a man who, as a Roman Catholic convert, was to produce not only the best devotional modern poetry of his church but a kind of poetry found exciting in the next century. The pale, thin ascetic-looking young man with the Oxford accent and the deep-sunk hazel eyes faced Christina’s equally passionate and introspective hazel eyes. They may both have been shy, or Christina may have followed her precept of behavior in public gatherings to say little, to pretend that she was the humblest, the least important person there: “Grant me the lowest place.” George MacDonald and Jenny Lind were among

* Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Further Letters*, p. 67.

the guests at this party. The great singer noted for her exemplary private life, strong religious convictions as well as talents may have won Christina's approval, and distracted her attention from Gerard Manley Hopkins. It took the stain of sin away from the stage and concert hall to meet a Jenny Lind, devout, domestic, with great gifts used (or so it seemed) only for the betterment of mankind.

Like her brother Dante Gabriel, or like William Butler Yeats, Christina was not musical in the conventional sense; the only music that mattered to them was the music that welled up from some unconscious, some prenatal source, when they wrote their poetry.

Christina was visited about this time by Dr. Richard Garnett, who was to write of her with lukewarm admiration many years after her death; but she was not at her best with professionally literary, clever people—hence the lack of lasting intimacy with Coventry Patmore, William Bell Scott, and Sir Edmund Gosse. Swinburne, who never tired of singing her praises as he saw more and more of her poems in print, was more than a man of letters—at his best, he was a great poet himself, and he was a true poet in his unworldliness and generosity to those whose work he admired.*

We also find Christina Rossetti visiting the charming and rising young Burne-Joneses, a couple whose delicate reverence (we cannot call it obsequiousness) to the best people was always reciprocated by the best people. Burne-Jones lived to refine the original Pre-Raphaelite wildness, sensuousness, and fantasy, till it shone with mid-Victorian sweetness and purity. In later years Georgiana, Lady Burne-Jones, spoke carefully of Christina's "caustic tongue." We wish she had given some example of this fault, for we find few evidences of it in her letters, except hon-

* To those whom he did not admire, he could be brutal, and sadistic, and unjust.

esty amounting to bluntness that sometimes creeps through their formality. But the Burne-Joneses worshiped Dante Gabriel and would admit no other Rossetti into the shrine they had built for him. This was true of William Morris and his wife, whom Christina and her mother visited frequently in those days.

Christina became friendly with Jane Morris, who moved majestically and vaguely through the medieval grandeur of her home. Silent now (in this at least resembling Elizabeth Siddal) and always ailing * as if struggling with some inner conflict, she faced Christina as she faced Dante Gabriel, a mysterious Astarte, a Persephone, a Guenevere moving in an unreal world of her own. But the few visitors who drew her out found her a cozy little woman, her conversation somewhat commonplace, though not without some quiet wit. She read little but gossipy eighteenth century memoirs and popular fiction of the day. Her husband’s magnificent vitality, impersonal and driving, seemed to deprive her of true personality, and it was only after his death that she had a sudden flowering and emerged as a sibyl, overpowering and impressive.

We also find Christina entering at this time upon what, later and earlier, she would have called “frivolities.” She was at a Pre-Raphaelite gathering where the hosts and guests appeared in Arabic costumes and she herself appeared in “Syrian dress.” There is no doubt that she was then at her most lovely, most feminine, and most cheerful. An attractive picture of her survives from this period, when she was in the late twenties or early thirties.

Among Christina’s friends was Anne Gilchrist, later known for her ardent friendship for Walt Whitman. She had been introduced to Whitman’s poetry through the enthusiasm of the Rossetti brothers whose acquaintance she had made when her

* But she died as late as 1914, at a great age.

husband Alexander Gilchrist was working on his life of William Blake—a book that with enthusiastic Pre-Raphaelite support did much to uncover Blake's submerged reputation. When Gilchrist died in 1861 with the book still incomplete, both William and Dante Gabriel helped Mrs. Gilchrist to complete it; and they always retained their friendship for her. In 1863 she was living in a pretty little villa in Surrey, and she invited Christina to stay with her for a short holiday. It was one of Christina's few visits away from home, and she appeared shy and hesitant. Mrs. Gilchrist's daughter Grace, then a child, describes the impression Christina made on her:

I have a vivid impression of playing ball with her one summer afternoon upon a sloping lawn, under the branches of an old apple tree in the garden of a tiny hamlet among the Surrey hills. . . . She was then a dark-eyed slender lady in the plenitude of her powers, having already written some of her most perfect poems. . . . To my child's eyes she appeared like some fairy princess who had come from the sunny South to play with me. In appearance she was Italian with her olive complexion and deep hazel eyes. She possessed too the beautiful voice all the Rossettis were gifted with—a voice made up of strange sweet inflexions which rippled into silvery modulations, making ordinary English words and phrases fall upon the ear with a soft foreign intonation—though she pronounced the words themselves with the purest of English accents.

This too is an excellent description of a special quality in her verse, the faintly exotic cadences which give some of her poems their strange original air. Something of the quality—the quality of English spoken almost too precisely, too perfectly—may be found in that other unusual talent, Joseph Conrad, and occasionally in George Santayana, both of whom came to English as a foreign tongue. Little Grace Gilchrist noticed Christina's passion for strange small animals and admired the way she would hold cold little toads or caterpillars in the hollows of her beautiful hands.

Christina had also made friends, or rather had struck up acquaintance, with three women poets well known at the time whom she admired; and it is characteristic that her widest reading in contemporary poetry consisted at one time in the women poets of her day. One of the three was Jean Ingelow, who after Elizabeth Browning’s death became one of the most popular poets of her day, certainly the most popular of the women writing poetry. She still has (deservedly) her readers, and her verse at its best is Tennysonian in its sweetness, delicate in its little observations of nature. She is best known for her haunting ballad “The High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire,” with its mournful refrain, but in the 1860’s she had become the woman poet *par excellence*, the inheritress not only of Elizabeth Browning but of the ancestress of them all, Felicia Hemans. Tennyson had taught her grace and sweetness; Felicia Hemans, mild and facile numbers; and, as she won praise from Edmund Gosse and the woman-poet-worshiping Watts-Dunton, her fame and popularity spread to America. In 1864 Christina wrote a letter to Mrs. Gilchrist in which humor hid a slight envy of Miss Ingelow’s great success, her many editions. She was conscious enough of the small sale of her books. Still it was a relief to be told by Dante Gabriel that her publisher Alexander Macmillan, who not only printed the best poetry of his day but also loved it—and lectured on it—had memorized some of her poems and was fond of quoting them in his lectures.

Another of her friends was the now completely forgotten Dora Greenwell, a religious and mystical poet whom even the reserved William Michael Rossetti liked. Neurotic, elegant, serious, her verse suggests an aborted, a less talented Alice Meynell. She enjoyed ill health very often and had strong intellectual interests and corresponded with learned men on scientific and religious and philosophic questions. William Mi-

chael approved of her distinguished manner and her elocution—"a graceful, sweet, tripping delivery."

Christina's comments on these poets are affectionate, aloof, rather than critical. When she was asked to write a book on Adelaide Procter,^{*} another popular woman poet she had known at one time, whose piety and good works and "plaintive, pleasing and prolific" verses and pious death helped to make her vogue, she hastily suggested that the book ought to be done by someone else. She thought that perhaps a book on Elizabeth Barrett Browning might be more congenial, but changed her mind and suggested (and this suggestion came from the real Christina) a book on Ann Radcliffe, one of the founders of the Gothic novel. But the research was tedious, and she gave it up.

Meanwhile, she was at work on new poems, sending them on to Dante Gabriel for criticism, and she found his criticism just and valuable though she often held her ground against him.

He could be severe when severity was necessary. In one poem still an anthology favorite—like many other anthology favorites, one of Christina's worst and least characteristic poems—"A Royal Princess," Dante Gabriel felt that he could detect Mrs. Browning's most flowing and oratorical manner. He brought her back to herself by commenting on the style which had become a mannerism among a number of women poets of the period who made up by eloquence, exhibitionistic sentiment, and public speech what they lacked in delicacy and precision. "Falsetto muscularity," † he later called the manner, and begged her to avoid it. This was unnecessary, for her natural gift was quite different from that of the "great poetess." As Virginia Woolf has noted in her essay on Christina Rossetti, a firm hand pruned her

* The daughter of "Barry Cornwall," she is now best known as the author of "A Lost Chord." Though her hymns are in the Anglican hymnal she died a Roman Catholic convert.

† *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family-Letters*, Vol. II, p. 323. Robert Browning's hostility to Dante Gabriel may be due to his criticism of Mrs. Browning. He told Holman Hunt as much, adding "I can never forgive him."

lines, a sharp ear tested their music, and nothing soft, otiose, or irrelevant cumbered her pages (except in rare lapses, of which “A Royal Princess” is a most glaring example). In this alone she is most unlike Mrs. Browning, though the prestige of the “great poetess” who was “almost a good poet” influenced even the fine gifts of Christina on very rare and unfortunate occasions.

5

A strain of true inspiration and beauty enters some of the best poetry she wrote in the 1860’s. She had taken to heart (literally, as well as in a literary sense) the painter Millet’s remark to the Romantic artist, “Keep away from the theatre.” In some of the poems she was sending to Dante Gabriel for criticism such as “A Royal Princess,” the theatre entered; but, after all, that poem is not characteristic of Christina. The melancholy monotony that was to enter some of her later poems was not yet heard—it is as if she had established a traditional poetry that was original and yet her own. “To carry on a tradition,” said D. H. Lawrence in his essay on John Galsworthy, “you must add to the tradition. But to carry on a convention needs only the monotonous persistence of the parasite.” And in her poetry of this her middle period, she was achieving that remarkable thing, a poetry that seemed both traditional and fresh, written in cadences that had a familiar and yet original air. She was at work on one of her masterpieces, the now too little appreciated “The Prince’s Progress.” Dante Gabriel was urging her to publish again, but she was in no hurry to publish until she had perfected her new long poem. She wrote to him in 1864: “Don’t think me a perfect weather-cock. But why rush before the public with an immature volume?” By 1866, the same year that saw the arrival of Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*, *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* appeared. “The Prince’s Progress,” which she had originally called “The Alchemist,” was not as popular as

"Goblin Market," but it is indeed one of the finest poems of the nineteenth century. It is darker in atmosphere, less fresh and young than "Goblin Market"; the imagery though still rich is subdued, and the glow that shoots through the poem in sudden illuminations comes again from Christina's skill in evoking an exotic and surprising music. The musical effects of this poem are indeed remarkable. The poem displays a skill that is both strange and intricate though the story, the plot, the figures who move in and out of their lyrical interludes, seem as simple as things seen in a daydream or in a fairy tale. The theme of the poems is one of Christina's recurrent ones, the broken betrothal motif; and there is even a moral which one need not bother with, for it is in the mournful music, the imagery flickering from light to dark, the restrained and yet voluptuous atmosphere full of graceful melancholy, that makes the poem both curious and memorable.

A princess is waiting for her lover, who is so slow in arriving to marry her that at last she fears he may never come. The prince has loitered on the way, has encountered many temptations, has wandered forth and lost himself in landscapes of Pre-Raphaelite unearthliness:

A land of chasm and rent, a land
Of rugged blackness on either hand:

.
A land of neither life nor death,
Where no man buildeth or fashioneth,
Where none draws living or dying breath;
 No man cometh or goeth there,
 No man doeth, seeketh, saith,
 In the stagnant air.

In this wild gloom, these Salvator Rosa landscapes peopled by Pre-Raphaelite figures, snatches of song rise through the muted overtones that seem to be overheard at long distance. The note

The Two Brothers and Maria—“The Prince’s Progress” 139
of languid sensual sweetness is struck almost at the beginning of
the poem

Till all sweet gums and juices flow,
Till the blossom of blossoms blow,
The long hours go and come and go;
 The bride she sleepeth, waketh, sleepeth,
Waiting for one whose coming is slow:—
 Hark! the bride weepeth.

“How long shall I wait, come heat, come rime?”—
“Till the strong Prince comes, who must come in time”
(Her women say): “there’s a mountain to climb,
 A river to ford. Sleep, dream and sleep;
Sleep” (they say): “we’ve muffled the chime;
 Better dream than weep!”

And through this somnolent atmosphere we have the true Pre-Raphaelite coloring in the Prince’s inquiry about his bride and the answer:

“By her head lilies and rosebuds grow;
The lilies droop, will the rosebuds blow?
The silver slim lilies hang the head low;
 Their stream is scanty, their sunshine rare;
Let the sun blaze out, and let the stream flow,
 They will blossom and wax fair.

“Red and white poppies grow at her feet.
The blood-red wait for sweet summer heat,
Wrapped in bud-coats, hairy and neat;
 But the white buds swell, one day they will burst,
Will open their death cups, drowsy and sweet:—
 Which will open the first?”

Nor among the least attractive of the stanzas with its air of a sophisticated folk ballad are the ones that tell of the Prince’s

temptation for a demonic milkmaid. Somehow the rosy, cheery milkmaid fair, and gay, and bantering, who suddenly becomes a belle-dame-sans-merci within an atmosphere of supernatural terror, still remains free from bathos; just as we feel that it would be impossible for her not to arouse laughter instead of fears. But so light, so fresh are the verses, so innocent and full of ancient depths the folk-lilt of the melody that the verses carry their own beauty:

Was it milk now, or was it cream?
Was she a maid, or an evil dream?
Her eyes began to glitter and gleam;
He would have gone, but he stayed instead;
Green they gleamed, as he looked in them:
"Give me my fee," she said.—

"I will give you a jewel of gold."—
"Not so; gold is heavy and cold."—
"I will give you a velvet fold
Of foreign work your beauty to deck."—

The lyric climax of the poem arises when, the long journey over, the temptations all spent, his ardor reawakened, the errant bridegroom arrives at the gold portals of his bride's chamber. There he is greeted by a procession of Pre-Raphaelite figures moving in a harmony of muffled voices, dark veils, and draperies; and, as they move through torchlight, the darkened halls vibrate with their song, probably the best known passage of "The Prince's Progress":

"Too late for love, too late for joy,
Too late, too late!
You loitered on the road too long,
You trifled at the gate:
The enchanted dove upon her branch

Died without a mate;
The enchanted princess in her tower
Slept, died, behind the grate;
Her heart was starving all this while
You made it wait.”

It might have been the story of Dante Gabriel and Elizabeth Siddal.

6

Shortly after the publication of *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* Christina paid a short visit to Penkill Castle in Ayrshire as the guest of her brother’s friend Alice Boyd, whose picturesque castle was surrounded by Romantic landscapes that filled Dante Gabriel’s mind with dream imagery of water and woods for his poems. Miss Boyd through William Bell Scott, for whom she had an attachment, met the Rossettis and even managed to pierce Christina’s shyness and occasional stiffness. We have a description of Christina from one who saw her at Penkill leaning on the four-cornered window of her room which overlooked a garden. “Her elbows on the sill, her hands supporting her face,” she seems caught for a while in the wild tranquillity of Scotch waves, winds, and waters.

Charles Bagot Cayley, whom she had known for so long, had come into her heart and had inspired her last and deepest love, a love that was to end not with his life but with hers. Good health, warmth, some of the healing pleasure of success had softened her in this meridian moment, and in her work of this period, among much that is gray and mournful in atmosphere, we now are startled by an occasional classical or Renaissance image, something Italian and glowing:

I marked where lovely Venus and her court
With song and dance and merry laugh went by;

Weightless, their wingless feet seemed made to fly,
 Bound from the ground and in mid air to sport.
 Left far behind I heard the dolphins snort,
 Tracking their goddess with a wistful eye,
 Around whose head white doves rose, wheeling high

.

All this I saw in Spring. Through summer heat
 I saw the lovely Queen of Love no more.

She, who had written in "Autumn Violets,"

Keep violets for the spring, and love for youth,
 Love that should dwell with beauty, mirth, and hope

was to remember this period too as her golden age.

The ever generous William Michael had even arranged for a holiday abroad for Christina, her mother, and himself. No doubt the scholarly Maria, absorbed in her researches and devotions, had decided to stay at home. And so in 1865 * Christina had one of the very few holidays in her withdrawn life, and knew the excitements and joys and renewal of spirit that come in seeing fresh scenes, new faces. The Rossettis went through France, Switzerland, visited Italy, Como, Pavia, Brescia, and Milan, and it is interesting to discover that she preferred looking at lakes, mountains, and flowers to seeing art galleries. It is also an interesting reflection on the Pre-Raphaelites (for we know that Dante Gabriel agreed with him) that when William Michael visited an impressionist exhibit in Paris he immediately expressed a strong sense of dislike for Manet's "Olympia," which he considered "a most extreme absurdity"; and he was equally disturbed by Courbet. Yet William Michael was at this time one of the most influential art critics in London.

* In 1861 Christina took a very short holiday with her mother and William Michael, visiting Paris and Rouen. These were her only two visits to the continent.

Christina remembered best the forget-me-nots that grew at the ascent of Mount St. Gotthard. “Unforgettable and never to be forgotten the lovely lavish efflorescence which made earth as cerulean as the sky,” she wrote afterward.

In Italy she observed the earliest poppies and noted that in England they were somewhat brighter. She knew now that the delicate silvery tones of the English landscape, the low and surprising shades of mist and watery light over a London street were very dear to her—dearer than the land of her fathers with its golden warmth and clear brightness. She always recalled the nightingales singing one starry evening over Lake Como and remembered how they made the beautiful June star-studded evening glow like a double rose, a doubled June. She left Italy with regret and greeted England again with joy.

To see no more the country half my own,
Nor hear the half familiar speech,
Amen, I say; I turn to that bleak North
Whence I came forth,

she says in “*Italia, Io Ti Saluto.*” And again speaking of Italy she says very quaintly: “Its people is a noble people and its very cattle are of high-born aspect. I am glad of my Italian blood.”

Glittering images of light, of warmer bird music, of broader horizons, remained with her, and from time to time we find them subtly transfused into her poems. She had learned to look beyond her small dark rooms in a dingy gray-brown street and to know that

Beyond the seas we know stretch seas unknown,
Blue and bright-coloured for our dim and green;
Beyond the lands we see stretch lands unseen
With many-tinted tangle overgrown;
And icebound seas there are like seas of stone.

· · · · ·

All things we see lie far within our scope,
And still we peer beyond with craving face.

It was the icebound seas in their static unchanging beauty that she had grown to prefer; but she had seen Italy, the all-embracing sunlight, heard the classic nightingale on the Aphrodite-haunted Mediterranean, that she was never to forget when the nights grew too long and cold. The Mediterranean warmth in her veins was to call her often, but the delicate shifting English twilights so long-drawn and melancholy were of her everyday world; they muted her Italian ardor. In the June 2 entry of her reading diary *Time Flies*, she made comparisons between the ceremonial beauty of the Roman Church that had been the church of her fathers and the austere dignity of the Church of England, the church of the *Via Media* that she had adopted with all her mind, her heart, her soul. She then ended her reflections.

“Christians are called to be like stars—luminous, steadfast, majestic, attractive.” It was in the insistence on the word “attractive” that she betrayed her Latin heritage, the insistence on beauty, order, and grace even in her strictest austerities.



Monna Innominata and Charles Bagot Cayley—The Hushed Life

THE period between the writing of "Goblin Market" and the publication of "The Prince's Progress" was also the time when Christina's love affair with Charles Bagot Cayley reached its crisis and conclusion. For the rest of her life (and his) he remained a wistful figure, crossing and recrossing her life's threshold, and next to her mother the dearest object of her affections. She had known him before her father's death; he had been old Gabriele's favorite pupil, and, except for the slightly whimsical affection that he aroused in all who knew him, she had not been on terms of close friendship with him. Old Gabriele, however, had said that Cayley was the most earnest and eager of his Italian scholars, and when the old poet lay on his deathbed the ladies of the Rossetti family noticed the eagerness, the courtesy, with which he expressed his friendship and affection for the dying man. It touched the heart of Christina, her mother, and her sister, but William Michael had learned to know Cayley well before the long vigil at Gabriele Rossetti's bedside began. There is no doubt that Cayley had loved Christina for a long time, but his air of self-deprecation and withdrawal had kept him from betraying his feelings.

turned to England with his family as a boy; but one can detect if one wishes a faint un-English quality of sadness, a curious tinge of "foreignness" in his character that would endear him to Christina who loved all lost and lonely things, all shy, hurt, hunted things. His elder brother, afterwards a celebrated mathematician and lecturer at Cambridge, had gone to school with the Rossetti brothers. Charles Bagot Cayley's gift for languages was extraordinary; he had the passion for pure and unlucrative and out-of-the-way knowledge that is the curse and hallmark of the born scholar or antiquarian. He translated the *Divine Comedy* (all the Rossettis admired the translation, though nobody else did); he was an excellent Greek scholar and also did translations of the *Iliad* and of *Prometheus Bound*; and as a passionate student of Hebrew he paraphrased the psalms from Hebrew into English. At one time he became absorbed in the Iroquois language and translated the Gospels into that tongue. The Slavonic dialects were, it was said, not unknown to him, and there may have been translations from the Bulgarian or Serbian, for he was very industrious and little of his work is now available. Of all his labor only a few stray volumes in the British Museum exist, probably unread except by biographers of Christina Rossetti. He had also published a little volume of original poems with the pretty name of *Psyche's Interludes* in 1857, of which the best that can be said is that they are not quite unreadable. This shy tentative bid for fame had gone unnoticed and he had sunk into scholarship, daydreaming, and abstractions, and the poverty that goes with them—a wistful and lonely man who haunted the British Museum, shabbily dressed, but with a face that a few of his friends found beautiful because it was full of goodness, sweetness, gentleness and unworldliness. In early life the possessor of a comfortable income, he had lost it in a characteristic way. He had been invited to join a venture to put up advertising pictures in public places,

especially railroad stations. Of course, artists would be employed to do these posters which would advertise commercial projects, and no doubt Cayley felt that he was engaged in something both lucrative and "artistic"—the fatal error often made by those who do not understand finance and know only a little about art. This scheme (one wishes it had never been thought of) failed, and with it went Cayley's fortune. But unfortunately, in other and cruder hands, the scheme came to life and succeeded, for it was the original of one of the horrors of our civilization, the advertising billboard!

Cayley was helped by his family; at least they were able to settle a very small allowance on him that enabled him to pursue his intense and harmless studies, and poverty added to his shyness, his tremulous self-effacing courtesy and sadness. Though his eccentricities caused mild amusement in the Brown family, Ford Madox Brown, that large golden-bearded hearty man, took the shy and dreamy Mr. Cayley to his heart. His young son Oliver Brown in a juvenile novel drew an amusing portrait of Cayley as the very archetype of the absent-minded professor, representing him as writing his great life work, a tremendous and, of course, never to be completed book called *Studies Toward a Topographical and Archaeological and Historical Account of North Devonshire*. Oliver's father had painted Cayley as an abstracted astronomer watching the transit of the planet Venus. But all teasing of Cayley was done with respect, so great his courtesy, so exquisite and yet Johnsonian his manner, so vast his learning, so deep his truthfulness and integrity.

We must see him then with the eyes of those who loved him when he called on Christina, her mother and sister in the house on Albany Street or at Euston Square where they had moved in 1867. His costume was shabby, but it had a prim decorum.

His careful manners had a touch of the last century's ceremoniousness that was even then a little quaint. He paid his morning calls regularly and was often to be found in the house indulging in his erudite conversation with an air of one who cannot but believe that the whole world shares his high thoughts and abstract ideas. With Christina he shared a love of small jokes and little puns, and with him Christina felt gay, worldly and even a little frivolous. He was probably the only person in the world who had made her feel like a giddy gay girl.

Cayley's oddity made his presence at social gatherings a delight to his friends and a source of amusement to outsiders. Standing shyly against the wall at a party where he knew no one, he felt that his duty to his hostess required that he make conversation. Approaching two ladies who stood near, he introduced himself by saying, "Madam, what do you think of the Gulf Stream?" No doubt he went into a learned discussion of the Gulf Stream, but one can understand Ford Madox Brown describing him a little later as "looking quite mad." Ford, like his grandson, Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford), had a touch of the extrovert. We know that his very oddities endeared Cayley to Christina, and it was during this period that an air of lightness, richness, and warmth seemed to stream from her verse. The famous "My heart is like a singing bird" and the Kate Greenaway-ish "Apple Gathering" were products of the time.

✓ William Michael and Dante Gabriel were now powers in the world of criticism and art, for in his impulsive, sometimes too generous way Dante Gabriel had marshaled the Pre-Raphaelites into a group that was to give the English literary and artistic scene a touch of ferocious clique solidarity such as had been better known on the Continent than in England. Members of the Brotherhood were to stick together, to share patrons, to recommend one another for jobs, to round up important critics and critical reviews for favorable notices of their work. In the

latter capacity, of course, William Michael as an art and book critic too became invaluable. From now on, no Pre-Raphaelite book or picture was ever left completely unpraised, no outsider was ever praised or considered unless he had interested Dante Gabriel and his friends and aroused their good will or admiration. As they grew in power and influence, they made themselves truly felt. Like most cliques they had a coterie reading list; and when Dante Gabriel or Swinburne discovered Blake or Landor or the *Rubáiyát* or the picturesque American Joaquin Miller or the equally picturesque American Walt Whitman, the name became known to a public that prided itself on being in the advance guard. For their taste was rapidly becoming known as the advanced artistic opinion of their day—and no one who wished to be smart or "modern" could ignore them.

Writers and artists outside the circle were naturally resentful. This or another private grievance may have led Robert Buchanan to launch his famous attack when Dante Gabriel Rossetti's long delayed book of poems appeared.* It was not only Rossetti he attacked in his ugly and underhanded (ugly, because uncandid) "The Fleshly School of Poetry," but William Michael and Swinburne, Morris, Ruskin, and their friends. All had rushed into print over Rossetti's new volume with praise so strong that it would have embarrassed a Shakespeare or a Dante, and Rossetti was a fine but faulty poet. Years later, Oscar Wilde, who knew much Pre-Raphaelite gossip, insisted that there was a real literary cabal against Rossetti, and that his persecution complex was more than justified. Certainly Browning's letters show that he was no admirer of Rossetti and his school; Cardinal Newman, Lord de Tabley, and others approved of Buchanan's stand and Tennyson, at least in private, agreed

* W. Robertson Nicholl in his essay on Buchanan reminds us that before the coming of the Pre-Raphaelites into the field of poetry Buchanan was the most popular of the younger poets, receiving as much as £400 advance for each volume of verse, a record price even today!

with Browning about Rossetti's poetry. Yet Tennyson in his earlier (and in some respects best) phase might be considered a Pre-Raphaelite himself, as in the beautiful "Lady of Shalott" with its Pre-Raphaelite décor and lovely music.

Like all masters of clique warfare, Dante Gabriel seemed surprised when his "strategy" went wrong—surprised and grieved. But he was an invaluable friend to Cayley, who, poor, obscure, and unpushing, received small literary jobs of editing and translating through the Rossetti brothers. Secure in the dusty darkness of the British Museum, he was lost in occupations pleasurable to himself and sometimes in a small way remunerative. Unlike another Victorian, Gissing, he went through "the valley of the shadow of books" with pleasure. It was his natural world, and the sight of the industrious bowed backs around him filled him with security and peace. The only emotion that troubled him now was for Christina. In a thousand timid ways, he tried to make her understand that he loved her, and did not know that she had known all the time. His courtship was peculiarly Cayleyan. A sea mouse he had picked up on the shore during a holiday was sent to Christina as a special bid for her favor, with the assumption that she would admire such a rare curiosity as much as he did. It was preserved for perpetuity in spirits of wine, and with it he sent her a little dissertation on sea mice. The scientific name for it was rather pretty, he thought: *Aphrodite aculeata*. And Christina did admire it. William Michael, who saw it in her room, spoke of it with mingled irritation and humor. However, he admitted it had brilliant colors! Christina kept it to the end of her life and even wrote Cayley a poem on this prized gift, a poem full of tenderness and unaccustomed humor:

A Venus seems my Mouse
Come safe ashore from foaming seas,

Which in a small way and at ease
Keeps house.

An Iris seems my Mouse,
Bright bow of that exhausted shower
Which made a world of sweet herbs flower
And boughs.

A darling Mouse it is:—
Part hope not likely to take wing,
Part memory, part anything
You please.

Venus-cum-Iris Mouse,
From shifting tides set safe apart,
In no mere bottle, in my heart
Keep house.

It is curious in this almost coy, almost skittish poem to notice the domestic imagery. And does she not somehow identify Cayley himself with the sea mouse?

4

Years later Christina made delicate and remorseful little apologies to Cayley. Quick to examine and reproach herself for the slightest lapse from the highest standard of perfection, she felt that perhaps she had been too coquettish. Had she not led him on—only to disappointment? For it was recognized at last that marriage was impossible: the brutal, the dividing truth had to be faced. Gentleman and scholar as he was, Cayley was —no, not an atheist, but an agnostic! Cayley was not a Collinson, he could not even pretend to convictions that he did not have. As one of Christina's biographers has said, "Cayley remained loyal to a hopeless passion and faithful even to the infidelity which made it hopeless." "Infidelity" is a strong word—he was

simply an agnostic; but Christina would have put this on the same level as atheism. If he could not marry Christina he at least kept her lasting love and respect. Nor was religion the only reason. Cayley was very poor, and his gifts were not lucrative. In vain he translated from the Hebrew, from the Iroquois, from the Greek, in vain with a sad gesture of modesty he printed a poem here and there—it was becoming plain that even a reasonable prosperity would never be within his reach.

Christina thought highly of his translation of Dante and suggested to Dante Gabriel that he send it on to Ruskin. Ruskin refused to be moved—he was not often trapped into praise—and answered that Cayley's English was bad. No doubt it was nothing worse than the language of uninspired scholarship, the despair of the layman, that disturbed Ruskin; but Cayley took this blow with his customary resignation. He became more and more withdrawn, more eccentric than ever. The friendly Ford Madox Brown met him at a midsummer reception at Dante Gabriel's, where in an intense heat everyone sat out in the garden consuming innumerable plates of strawberries and cream. Cayley was in a corner by himself, and Brown writes, "I forgot to mention Cayley who looks mad and is always in a rumpled shirt without collar and an old tail coat." But he had lost interest in the outer world, and his greatest pleasure after his studies was to call on the Rossetti ladies—to play chess with Mrs. Rossetti, to read to Christina, to help Maria in her research on the Dante book she was completing, to do bits of difficult research for William Michael.

His photograph, taken in the early 1870's, is before us—it was taken at the time when his love for Christina had softened into a hopeless tenderness, something to be felt, to be suffered, never to be mentioned. It is hard to believe William Michael when he tells us that Cayley in his youth was considered good-looking. But we must imagine him as he appeared to his friends,

and as he gained their affection, wistful, withdrawn, ever ready to respond to affection and giving it in great measure. In the photograph we have of him, he appears to be a frail small man with good clothes that have been slept in. He has a large forehead; his eyes seem tired and nearsighted, and one is certain that he could not have read the book he is holding in his lap without strong glasses, which he may have taken off as the photographer approached him. Some of the pathos in this portrait may come simply from the natural pathos that clings around a faded photograph of a half-forgotten person taken far in a past that has not yet crystallized into antiquity. William Michael, who was fond of Cayley, had offered to support Christina and Cayley. At one time he suggested that they all live together in Euston Square: at least they could all live together there rent-free, and with Cayley's small income and Christina's equally small literary earnings the marriage would not be impossible—that is, if poverty was the only impediment. Christina was too sensible and would not accept further sacrifices from this too sacrificing brother. But she wrote him asking for further small kindnesses to Cayley. Of her poverty she wrote, "As for money, I might be selfish enough to wish that it were the only bar." It seemed that Cayley after his rejection felt that he ought not to call on her, for Christina adds: "God knows I like to see him."

William Michael had sent another translation of Cayley's to the irascible Ruskin, who this time answered with a little more kindness. "I think Mr. Cayley has failed simply by attempting the impossible." Poor Cayley. He was always unfortunate! But as Dorothy Stuart has remarked in her comment on Christina and Cayley, misfortune is not always unattractive in one we love. One of the chief attractions he held for Christina—as we have already noticed—can best be explained in William Michael's words: "Of all men I have known he was the most typical

example of the studious, naturally unobservant of the ways of the world, and indifferent to them."

5

For the rest of his life Cayley remained Christina's constant lover. Year followed year, season followed season and touched with April hope, summer warmth, autumn pallor, and winter chill the brownstone steps of the house in Albany Street or Euston Street. They met at the houses of their friends, he visited her as frequently as possible. These visits became the great pleasure and consolation of her middle life—the hours when Cayley entered the door after some work in the British Museum, his worn eyes blinking a little in the restless, fretful gloom of her little sitting room. There Christina sitting upright on her small faded blue sofa and Cayley lounging in a large winged armchair that had belonged to an eighteenth century Polidori would carry on their hushed conversations on books, art, life, on this world which seemed so strange and sad, and on the next world which filled her with a lyric hope and him with a sad silence. When he could not see her, he sent her letters that were tender, humorous, full of puns and learned allusions. Their courtesy to each other became a joke to younger members of the Rossetti family growing up.

Later, a young relative, Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford), was to say of them, "Although she would not be his wife, no woman ever loved a man more deeply or more constantly." And he spoke of Cayley's rare qualities that so elude us in his letters, mild and scholarly as they are, and in his awkward faded photograph where we seem to face not a living man, but an unwilling visitor from a world of ghosts.

✓ 6

The monument to this love was built by Christina in her "Monna Innominata" sonnets, one of the great sonnet sequences in the English language, and in a handful of some of the most poignant love poems in English. They are certainly among the few great poems written by a woman and, certainly, among the finest poems by any woman who has written poetry in English.

Compared to them, Elizabeth Browning's famed "Sonnets from the Portuguese" appear too eloquent and fluent. In Mrs. Browning we seem to hear and see a woman declaiming under a midday sun where there is neither shadow nor shelter from too much heat and light, a heat that is too golden and a light that is too crude. But as we enter the Petrarchan portals of the "Monna Innominata" sonnets, we are startled by the delicate modulated lights and shades, the nuances of a subtle and moving art. This songbook of unhappy love (as someone has called the sequence) carries its catharsis too in its slow transference of earthly passions into religious emotion. It is this that is the most distinguishing characteristic of even the lesser sonnets and poems of what we may call the Cayley cycle. What can be more moving or revealing than the second sonnet in the "They Desire a Better Country" cycle?

What seekest thou, far in the unknown land?
In hope I follow joy gone on before;
In hope and fear persistent more and more,
As the dry desert lengthens out its sand.
Whilst day and night I carry in my hand
The golden key to ope the golden door
Of golden home; yet mine eye weepeth sore,
For long the journey is that makes no stand.
And who is this that veiled doth walk with thee?
Lo, this is Love that walketh at my right;

One exile holds us both, and we are bound
To selfsame home-joys in the land of light.
Weeping thou walkest with him; weepeth he?—
Some sobbing weep, some weep and make no sound.

And what can be more candid than the last sonnet in the group of sonnets called "By Way of Remembrance" which were written in 1870?

I love you and you know it—this at least,
This comfort is mine own in all my pain:
You know it, and can never doubt again,

.

Life as a rolling moon doth wax and wane—
O weary moon, still rounding, still decreased!
Life wanes: and when Love folds his wings above
Tired joy, and less we feel his conscious pulse,
Let us go fall asleep, dear Friend, in peace;—
A little while, and age and sorrow cease;
A little while, and love reborn annuls
Loss and decay and death—and all is love.

To this period belongs one of Christina's small masterpieces, the famous "Amor Mundi," which has been considered by the best qualified judges as among the best poems (and the most lasting) of the nineteenth century. The technical skill of the poem alone would make it remarkable, and through it we hear the sound of human voices in warning and in anger and at last in despair. The images at first seem to be drawn from some graceful lesser seventeenth century Cavalier poet, a Lovelace, Carew, Suckling, Habington, or Kynaston; but through the delicate lightness of the poem's texture is blended a biblical strength and intellectual force. The poem is too well known to quote in its entirety, but one is tempted to give a few stanzas so as to display again its beauty:

"Oh where are you going with your love-locks flowing,

On the west wind blowing along the valley track?"

"The downhill path is easy, come with me an it please ye,

We shall escape the uphill by never turning back."

So they two went together in glowing August weather,

The honey-breathing heather lay to their left and right;

And dear she was to doat on, her swift feet seemed to float on

The air like soft twin pigeons too sportive to alight.

• • • • •
"Oh what is that glides quickly where velvet flowers grow thickly,

Their scent comes rich and sickly?" "A scaled and hooded worm."

"Oh what's that in the hollow, so pale I quake to follow?"

"Oh that's a thin dead body which waits the eternal term."

"Turn again, O my sweetest,—turn again, false and fleetest:

This beaten way thou beatest, I fear, is hell's own track."

"Nay, too steep for hill mounting; nay, too late for cost counting:

This downhill path is easy, but there's no turning back."

In the terror and submerged anger of this poem we seem to hear Christina carrying on a dialogue between her own passionate sensuous nature, and that strong and self-imposed austerity which was never quite to overcome it.

The "Monna Innominata" sonnets are indeed full of what Dorothy Stuart has called "the secret rhythms of the heart." Simple, sensuous, and passionate, they exhibit Christina's complete mastery of her style. Her flexible command of the sonnet form is remarkable. She has freed it from the technical monotony which lesser poets give it. All her experience, all her dreamy melancholy girlhood and strong-spirited maturity are in these sonnets, into which she has poured a love that seems to live in worlds beyond time. The Pre-Raphaelite delight in

sensational and wonderful coloring is gone—what speaks to us is a beauty austere, restrained, and yet warm with feeling. There is no doubt that she had read Elizabeth Browning's great and popular sonnet sequence, and we know that as a girl she had studied Petrarch; but it is not the Shakespeare of the sonnets, Petrarch, or Mrs. Browning that speaks here. Never has the narrowed intensity of Christina's gifts reaped a richer fruit; if "Monna Innominata" lacks Mrs. Browning's scope, it makes up in depth, polish, and formal beauty. She pays tribute to Mrs. Browning in her modest preface, where, speaking of the *donne innominate* sung by the Italian poets, she writes:

Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend. Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us in lieu of the "Portuguese Sonnets" an inimitable "donna innominata" drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.

In the first sonnet Christina invites the absent lover to return to her. The sound of that rare voice in poetry—"the answering voice" as the late Sara Teasdale called it, the voice of a woman's love ringing truly and naturally for once in lyric poetry—is heard as it was first truly heard by startled Victorian ears in Mrs. Browning's sonnet sequence. But Mrs. Browning in the Portuguese sonnets seems almost a little strident (it was not for nothing that she had admired George Sand from afar) and almost mannered after the simple poignancy of these unrhetorical poems. Even in the (to one reader at least) most beautiful of the Portuguese sonnets, where Mrs. Browning speaks of lifting up her heavy heart "as once Electra her sepulchral urn," we sense a literary fervor.

/ The difference between these two poets, so often compared,

so unsimilar, is best seen in their two sonnet sequences. Christina's delicate and poetic sensibility seems to this reader much more satisfactory in a work of art and more moving; and her finesse and firmness of finish, much richer in tone, more graceful, more natural:

O love, my world is you.
Howbeit, to meet you grows almost a pang
Because the pang of parting comes so soon;
My hope hangs waning, waxing, like a moon
Between the heavenly days on which we meet:
Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang,
When life was sweet because you called them sweet?

In the second sonnet she wishes that she could remember the first hour, first moment of their meeting, whether the season was summer or winter:

A day of days! I let it come and go
As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow;
It seemed to mean so little, meant so much;
If only now I could recall that touch,
First touch of hand in hand—Did one but know!

Very beautiful is the dream sonnet (the third), where longing and wistfulness seem to break out of a half-waking spell:

I dream of you, to wake: would that I might
Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;
Nor find with dreams the dear companion gone.

The full meaning of her renunciation is expressed in the sixth sonnet; and her mingling of mysticism, pathos, austerity, love, and stubborn denial is very characteristic. We can almost hear her voice—she is talking to Cayley and not through a book but with the living voice:

Trust me, I have not earned your dear rebuke,—
 I love, as you would have me, God the most;
 Would lose not Him, but you, must one be lost,
 Nor with Lot's wife cast back a faithless look,
 Unready to forego what I forsook;

• • • • •

Yet while I love my God the most, I deem,
 That I can never love you overmuch;
 I love Him more, so let me love you too;
 Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such
 I cannot love you if I love not Him,
 I cannot love Him if I love not you.

In the seventh sonnet, describing the love that can never know a dividing sea, there is a touch of feminine charm, of what can only be described as saintly coquettishness when she speaks of her brave words and her coward heart, of their few meetings and long partings. It ends:

Still I find comfort in his Book who saith,
 Though jealousy be cruel as the grave,
 And death be strong, yet love is strong as death.

The eighth sonnet has the Pre-Raphaelite pictorial splendor, her Esther might have stepped out of one of the classical or biblical paintings of Frederick Sandys or her brother when he posed his biblical heroine in an atmosphere of roses, rich jewels, golden vessels, and splendidly attired Nubian boys waving large plumed fans. But if the figure is that of a Pre-Raphaelite Esther, the voice is a woman's voice, human and passionate, and the language is the language of the King James Bible:

“If I perish, perish”—Esther spake:
 And bride of life and death she made her fair
 In all the lustre of her perfumed hair

And smiles that kindle longing but to slake.
She put on pomp of loveliness to take,
 Her husband through his eyes at unaware;
She spread abroad her beauty for a snare,
Harmless as doves and subtle as a snake.

• • • • •

If I might take my life so in my hand,
And for my love to Love put up my prayer,
 And for love's sake by Love be granted it!

In the ninth sonnet she pays Cayley her greatest tribute. Nothing can exceed the simplicity, the limpidity of her language and the note of passion that seems to break through a voice that has until now spoken only in quietness and deep restraint:

Thinking of you, and all that was, and all
 That might have been and now can never be,
I feel your honoured excellence, and see
Myself unworthy of the happier call:
For woe is me who walk so apt to fall,
 So apt to shrink afraid, so apt to flee,
Apt to lie down and die (ah woe is me!)
Faithless and hopeless turning to the wall.
And yet not hopeless quite nor faithless quite,
Because not loveless; love may toil all night,
But take at morning: wrestle till the break
 Of day, but then wield power with God and man:—
So take I heart of grace as best I can,
Ready to spend and be spent for your sake.

In the eleventh sonnet we see the Christina of the famous portrait done by her brother when she was in the last flowering of her beauty, when she was in what may be called the Cayley period of her life. The face is not the tender wraithlike face of the girl who in the early picture of Dante Gabriel receives the

largeworsted lily from the tall curly-headed sexless angel. It is a beautiful face; but, as Dorothy Stuart says, it is not so much an older as a stronger, deeper face. "The wistful look of the earlier Christina has given place to an aspect at once passionate and austere." It is surely this face we see in one of the most moving of the "Monna Innominata" sonnets:

Many in aftertimes will say of you
 "He loved her"—while of me what will they say?
 Not that I loved you more than just in play,
 For fashion's sake as idle women do.
 Even let them prate; who know not what we knew
 Of love and parting in exceeding pain,
 Of parting hopeless here to meet again,
 Hopeless on earth, and heaven is out of view.
 But by my heart of love laid bare to you,
 My love that you can make not void nor vain,
 Love that foregoes you but to claim anew
 Beyond this passage of the gates of death,
 I charge you at the Judgment make it plain
 My love of you was life and not a breath!

Very graceful and delicate is the last sonnet, where the lady contemplates herself and knows that the youth and beauty which had so delighted her lover were going, would soon be gone. The note of passion is now gone too, and in its timid grace we rediscover the wistful charm of the earlier Christina:

Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there
 Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;
 Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?
 I will not bind fresh roses in my hair,
 To shame a cheek at best but little fair,—
 Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn,—
 I will not seek for blossoms anywhere,
 Except such common flowers as blow with corn.

Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?
The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;
The silence of a heart which sang its songs,
While youth and beauty made a summer morn,
Silence of love that cannot sing again.

/ 8

The love between Cayley and Christina, as we have seen, was not merely an *amor intellectualis*; and in more than the "Monna Innominata" sonnets she was to prove this. The sonnets were not published till 1881, when Cayley himself was still alive to read them; and it is possible that he saw many of them in manuscript. In Italian she was also writing a number of poems which commemorated this strange spiritual marriage between herself and Cayley; and some of her best and most unspoken poems about her love she kept in her desk for publication after her death. At least she did not destroy these poems, and after her death the very correct William Michael did not hesitate to print them. But then he had always been a friend of Cayley, he had always urged the marriage to Christina, and one feels his customary slight note of irritation when he speaks of Christina's "scruples" in this love affair.

Cayley still continued his calls on the Rossetti ladies, his little jokes, his learned allusions, and his shy little gifts of very difficult books and embalmed animals and curious insects were accepted with gracious sweetness by Christina. She consulted him on points of biblical scholarship and correct English usage, and he answered her in long careful letters in which, if one looks long, one may find a tremulous note of tenderness under the extreme courtesy—the too great courtesy. A hushed, a pained tranquillity seemed to fall over her life, and it is through this painful hush that we sometimes hear her voice in such poems of renunciation as the one beginning "Once in a dream,"

a poem of wistfulness and passion. Years later her young relative, Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford), was to read their correspondence and marvel over what he remembered hearing of them, over what he had seen of Christina, and the evidence of the letters before him.¹ Such miracles of love, renunciation, and fidelity were rare in the generation in which he was to see his full maturity. He felt that the pattern of such love had died with "this essentially good and gentle man and this nun-like saintly woman." Christina herself has given us her own concept of love:

If we analyze love, what is it we love in our beloved? Something that is lovable, . . . something that kindles admiration, attracts fondness, wins confidence, nourishes hope, engrosses affection. If love arises from a mere misreading of appearances, then deeper insight may suffice to annul it. But if it arises from a genuine, though alas! transitory cause, then a transference of the endearing grace to another might seem the remedy. On earth the hollow semblance or the temporary endowment is believed in and preferred; in heaven the perpetual reality. Crown and love together are transferred from Vashti to Esther; the satisfied heart accepts Jacob as "very" Esau.*

It was in this mixture of metaphysics and biblical imagery that she managed to explain her love. It was in this way, fortified by metaphysics and religion, that she managed to exist after Cayley's death in what one of her biographers has called "a strange virginal widowhood."

Slowly all that was not God faded from her life, and it is only in understanding the conflict through which she conquered the hope of earthly happiness with Cayley that we can best understand her as she passes into the portals of middle age, of growing fame, of greater religious emotion. Never has the explanation of what that love meant to her been expressed better than in the sonnet "At Last," written at about the same

* *The Face of the Deep*, p. 40.

time as the “*Monna Innominata*” sonnets and decidedly belonging to the Cayley period:

Many have sung of love a root of bane:
While to my mind a root of balm it is,
For love at length breeds love, sufficient bliss
For life and death and rising up again.
Surely when light of Heaven makes all things plain,
Love will grow plain with all its mysteries;
Nor shall we need to fetch from over seas
Wisdom or wealth or pleasure safe from pain.
Love in our borders, love within our heart,
Love all in all, we then shall bide at rest,
Ended for ever life's unending quest,
Ended for ever effort, change, and fear:
Love all in all;—no more that better part
Purchased, but at the cost of all things here.

It is in such poems that we recognize the Christina of the middle years. The dreaming youthful face, the occasional note of Mediterranean grace and delicate sensuality disappear almost entirely. In its stead we hear the strong beat of her devotional poems with their heated grandeur and biblical language as if she had confined herself to the reading and exposition of one Book alone.

Before we part from the younger Christina we must examine her features in the beautiful photographs taken by a friend of hers, a friend whom she found most congenial, for in many respects he resembled Cayley. This was none other than the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as “Lewis Carroll.” His talent as a photographer has yet to be acknowledged. No one examining some of his remarkable portrait studies would fail to grant him a place with the forerunners of this very modern art, with Octavius Hill and Julia Cameron. His portraits of the Rossettis are among the best, and we are thankful for one

that brings the Rossetti family group (except Maria) before our eyes as they appeared in 1870. The scene is the famous back garden of Dante Gabriel's Cheyne Walk house. Christina is sitting on the garden steps dressed in what for all its simplicity must have been an elegant gown of dark-colored taffeta. The sweeping billows of her *bouffant* skirt make her look very charming and feminine; nor does she seem so much dressed in period, for the turn of fashion in the 1940's has brought this particular style back into vogue. Christina, we see, is still slender; she droops with pensive gracefulness, and her oval face and smooth dark hair still proclaim the first and most spiritual of the Pre-Raphaelite heroines. There is something truly feminine and truly elegant in the slight touch of white lace ruching at the neck and wrists. It is a woman of remarkable distinction and beauty at the height of her distinction and beauty—from now on the signs of illness, age, disappointment, the loss of physical beauty will begin to appear in her portraits. Dante Gabriel stands at her right hand, powerful, graceful in spite of his stockiness. William Michael—in his early portraits the most Italian, the most exotic-looking of the family in spite of his bald head—stands near them. There is something romantic and Byronic about the appearance of the one who is reputed to have been the sanest, the calmest, the most practical, and in many ways the least “creative” of the family. In the center of the group, sitting on the steps near Christina, is Francesca Rossetti, fair, massive, calm in her dark satin dress and a bonnet with white streamers, who seems to survey Dante Gabriel with great pride. Francesca was too sensible, too restrained to behave like Tennyson's mother, who is said to have startled innocent passengers on a London bus by remarking in a loud voice, “It may interest you to know that I am the Mother of the Laureate.” But she had her gratified pride, as we can feel in this scene, and somehow her massive placidity seems to swal-

low up her delicate, febrile children. The trees seem half stripped; some leaves have fallen on the steps, are dropping on the slender iron railings, and an autumnal atmosphere seems to brood over all the characters in the portrait group. It is in such an elegiac atmosphere that we can recall lines from Christina's "From House to Home"

Azure and sun were starved from heaven above,
No dew had fallen, the biting frost lay hoar;
Oh love I knew that I should meet my love,
Should find my love no more.



The Angel of Renunciation—The Pre-Raphaelite Scene: Middle Years and Fame (1870–1884)

IN the early spring of 1871, a young clergyman who held a curacy in a remote part of Wales was keeping a journal that would not see the light for more than half a century. He had the sensibility of a true poet, and he liked wandering in lonely, waste, and retired places, for there he wrote “dwell among them a spirit of gentle quiet and gentle melancholy more congenial and akin to my own spirit than full life and gaiety and noise.”

His journal reveals extraordinary poetic feeling, and his verbal imagery holds some of the beauty of the school of painters who followed Blake, or those in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, who portrayed the English landscape with haunting mystery and romantic feeling. This, the school of Samuel Palmer, Edward Calvert, Richard Wilson, and the early Turner, closely approaches the sensitive beauty and sylvan sweetness of the Virgilian pastoral. The young clergyman, Francis Kilvert, had gifts strangely akin to those painters, and was happiest when with fine, pure lines he put down in words the description of a stormy evening, or the starry wain, or the mountains standing “up in the clear blue heaven, a long rampart line of dazzling glittering snow so as no fuller on earth can white them.”

“ . . . An intense glare of primrose light streamed from the west deepening into rose and crimson.” Sometimes, less sublime, more delicate, we see through his eyes a cloudy March day and note how “against these black clouds the sunshine showed the faint delicate green and pink of the trees thickening with bursting buds.”

The man who could toss off these felicities with the ease and grace with which Christina Rossetti wrote her poems, read very little of the fashionable literature of the day. Only the very great names in poetry reached him, names like Tennyson and Mrs. Browning. He had seen one minor poet in the flesh, the Dorset dialect poet William Barnes later so much admired by Thomas Hardy; and his father had had memories of meeting the poet Crabbe, who was as much admired, respected, and neglected then as now. The Pre-Raphaelite poets were beginning to catch the eye of the sophisticated, but Francis Kilvert did not follow the latest literary news like Edward FitzGerald, a more “literary” person, who was writing to Tennyson about this time, “Dear me, how thick great poets are nowadays,” and again somewhat sardonically: “When I looked at the *Athenæum* I saw there were three poets scarce inferior to Dante and Shakespeare. These were Browning, Morris and D. G. Rossetti.” (Christina’s name was rarely mentioned and never received the attention bestowed on Elizabeth Browning or Dante Gabriel.) But Kilvert loved painting as most poetically minded people of the day loved painting, and in a way in which poetry was never quite loved.

Never were the walls of people of wealth or pretensions to culture so crowded with pictures—“modern” ones at that. It was indeed a great and indiscriminate period for modern art if by “modern” we mean only contemporary. The Royal Academy affairs became splendid indeed; beauty and fashion gathered there to pass pontifical judgments—even that never sus-

pected art lover, the Duke of Wellington, was often seen at Academy receptions, a lovely lady or two on his arm listening with awe to his loud and definite verdicts on the pictures. Holman Hunt once saw the Duke and an attractive young lady spellbound before a Landseer picture depicting some handsome dogs, a horse or two, and a gentleman in a polished top hat. Gone were the aristocratic simplicity and classic elegance of the day when Reynolds, Romney, and Gainsborough represented the best art; gone the careless brilliant polish of a Sir Thomas Lawrence. But then portrait painters alone could earn a living in the eighteenth century. Now one had only to catch the public eye guided by the press and Royal Academy backing, as one caught it with a new invention, a new luxury. This was best done with a touch of sentiment and pathos, a story that everyone could understand,* for the new patrons of art were the great manufacturers—so many of them self-educated—who in secret revolted against the stylized elegance of the last century, to whom the rich vigor of Reynolds, the poetic wistfulness of Gainsborough, and the smooth, florid grace of Romney were but memories of an older and more snobbish aristocracy. Faintly bitter among their memories were the gentlemen with clouded canes who took snuff and capped Latin quotations, the ladies arrogant, narrow-shouldered, exquisite, delicate, who sometimes used the most astonishingly strong language, and who looked down on the lower classes as if on a world beneath them.

These new people knew what they liked and were willing to pay for it; they now had all the best poets on their side; they had their novelists, their preachers, they had their hold on the universities; and the court on the whole agreed with them. The royal family knew what it liked too, it had its favorites in Landseer and in little Mary Severn (daughter of Keats's

* I am well aware that the picture that told a story, or genre painting, was not a new thing even then. But Victorian genre painting had a peculiar, awful charm of its own.

Severn) who did such pretty pictures of the royal children, and its favorite foreign painter, Winterhalter, whose showy art managed to give a feeling of luxury and grandeur without distinction.

To their period the Pre-Raphaelites contributed some of its best poetry, with a new sensibility, a tragic uneasiness, a distaste for the surrounding ugliness. With these Dante Gabriel made his greatest contribution as a painter,* and he cast the magic cloak of his gifts over the other Pre-Raphaelites. Their sense of some tragic waste was not unfelt, not unshared by the sensitive rising generation. To attend a Pre-Raphaelite exhibit, to own a Pre-Raphaelite picture became the hallmark of culture, setting one apart from the crowd and its vulgar taste. Meanwhile everyone who had any pretension to culture talked of art. Even George Eliot showed in some of the least inspired passages in her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, that she thought of herself as an art critic; and the far from aesthetic Trollope liked to put a painter or two in his novels and was willing to admire Millais when that painter had shed the unmanly Pre-Raphaelite nonsense of his youth. Dickens considered himself a first-rate art critic. It was true that he attacked the Pre-Raphaelites at first; but he knew exactly what he liked and bought it, filling his house with pictures by his favorite contemporaries. Thackeray, too, liked pictures, wrote art criticism and sometimes introduced a painter or two in his novels—not the carefree, naughty painters in the French style, but English painters full of lofty idealism and literary conceptions. We have only to read the letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was so sensitive to literary and aesthetic values, to see how much he loved painting. The pictures he admired were exactly the kind of pictures the Reverend Francis Kilvert liked to see,

* Dante Gabriel was often quoted as saying that he would have given up painting if he could have earned his living as a poet.

though he might not have described them in the same way. A picture that Kilvert saw in the Doré Gallery in Bond Street in the 1870's * was of a favorite Pre-Raphaelite subject, Paolo and Francesca—so popular with poets and painters that Gilbert and Sullivan, in caricaturing the Pre-Raphaelites in their decadence, would sing of the archetype as

A Japanese young man,
A blue-and-white young man,
Francesca di Rimini, miminy, piminy,
Je-ne-sais-quoi young man!

Let us follow Kilvert into the Doré Gallery and see the picture with his own eyes:

The beautiful girl stripped naked of her blue robe and stabbed in the side under the left breast is sailing through the air and reclines half standing, half lying back, supported tenderly in the arms of her lover who has been stabbed in the same place. . . . The naked girl is writhing and drawing up one of her legs in an agony—but her arms are thrown back and clasped passionately round her lover's neck. Her head lies upon his breast, her face is turned back up to his, and her eyes are looking into his eyes. . . . The anguish of death is stamped upon her white and sharpening yet still lovely features, but her soul is rapt above her pain in an ecstasy of love. The longing loving yearning look in her eyes grows more intense. Her arms are tightening with a last loving effort and clasp round her lover's neck. She feels she is going, but she knows that he will follow her soon, and that they will meet again before long at the Master's feet. Love is stronger than death.†

The language is not that of the art critics; but it was in this emotional state that picture lovers visited galleries and read their own meanings into the pictures and tacked on their own

* Kilvert unfortunately does not name the artist. To him the subject matter was the important thing.

† *Kilvert's Diary*, selections ed. William Plomer, pp. 179–180.

morals. Ruskin or Gerard Manley Hopkins no doubt, coming to Kilvert's picture, would have brought their knowledge of Dante and Italian history and their own temperaments. They would have liked the picture for other reasons; certainly, it was the kind they liked. Some of the story-pictures of the period carry a charm of their own. Holman Hunt's "Awakened Conscience" reflects the age and its aesthetic beautifully, with his careful detail—the overstuffed and overfurnished drawing room, the too rich carpet, the too heavy curtains, the bric-a-brac, the whiskered Victorian roué and his conscience-stricken mistress whom he is trying to draw on his lap, and who seems overdressed even in her dishabille. A delight to period decorators again—and this was not at all Hunt's ultimate intention: nor was it Rossetti's in such pictures as "The Lady Poisoner" or Millais's in many of his too carefully studied pictures. How these pictures were conceived is best described by Holman Hunt in explaining the origins of Millais's "Scotch Idyll":

His imaginary incident is of two youthful musicians in the English army after the battle of Culloden who have drawn to their place of encampment three Highland lasses. One boy is thrilling them by the strains of his flute, and the faces of the girls, as they lie on the grass, bear the expression of being carried away by the magic of the notes. . . . Proudly and yet with simplicity the boy proceeds with his charming task, and the innocent damsels follow the airs with rapture, while the spectator feels that already the evil spirit of discord between the lately contending factions has been laid at rest. This noble picture will hereafter be honoured as a national heirloom, both for its idea and for its artistic perfection.*

Literature and Art had become subject to competition unknown even in the grimest days of Grub Street. The rewards of success were enormous, of failure dreadful. There were so

* Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1905), Vol. II, pp. 402–403.

many more people now to appreciate the arts, to buy books and pictures, to talk of them. To fail was to fall far, far into the horrors of poverty in a country where poverty was the greatest of crimes; into loneliness too, for few of one's fellow artists could afford the depressing spectacle of one who had fallen into that abyss into which they themselves were always staring. The abyss of failure was so dark, so endless, the sunshine of success so shimmering and golden. Millais's house was a palace; royalty and the highest aristocracy vied for his presence at their dinner parties. The most beautiful and elegant women in London, the most distinguished statesmen sat at little Burne-Jones's table and, long after his master's death, heard him talk of "poor Gabriel." In the formidable, official, memoirs of the famous painters of the day pictures of their studios were often reproduced. Could anyone really paint in these magnificent store-houses of ornate furniture, of crowding bric-a-brac? One can understand the shock, the delight which the beauty of a clean bare wall gave to the aesthete of the next generation, revolting against such all too "cozy" splendor.

The lady-novelist, too, was in her heyday, and it is hard to say whether Mrs. Oliphant or George Eliot was more respected. Other women now forgotten to fame were then household names, reaped fabulous sums of money, and were present at all social functions where the arts were honored. George Eliot faded into Mrs. Humphry Ward, then into the sentimentalities of Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne*, the sometimes intelligent, colorful vulgarity of Ouida or later the slipshod foolishness of Marie Corelli. They were a vigorous lot, the Victorian lady-novelists, and their attitude to their public might have been summed up in the words of Queen Victoria, who, when told that a certain cabinet minister had a high opinion of her, said, "It does not signify what he thinks of us, the important thing is what we think of him." The royal "we" was not out of place.

Henry James, who knew the type well and who often looked wistfully at their large earnings and popularity, was never tired of writing about them with an immortal, delicate malice.

The reward of the poet—of the poet who had gained recognition—if not as great as that of the novelist, was greater surely than in our own unhappy time. We must consider the awe in which Tennyson was held, and remember that Browning was the hero of the drawing rooms, while Swinburne was read by undergraduates with a fervor, enthusiasm, and sense of guilt that no undergraduate, however admiring, can possibly hold for T. S. Eliot or W. H. Auden.

On the whole D. G. Rossetti kept aloof from the heat of the struggle, but when the time came he could muster legions to his defense; and when necessary he could take advantage of the growing popularity of his work to drive a hard bargain. Sheer talent as well as an instinctive gift for publicity had given him eminence; perhaps the extraordinary compelling power of his personality was another factor. Something too in that strange backward-turning revolt of the Pre-Raphaelites to a past that never existed, in its withdrawal into a dream of sensuous color and ecstasy and spiritualized passion, in its peculiar attempt to unite the metaphysical subtleties of Dante with the naïve, almost adolescent beauty of Malory's Arthurian legends, struck the fancy of the public, touched some deep chord of private longing.

Dante Gabriel was one of the fortunate artists who have the "personal touch," who can make all who read them or read about them feel as if they were people known intimately, who can make all who experience them think and feel with them and see all life with their slant vision. But, fortunate as he was, he too felt the terror of failure, the fear of the abyss even at the height of his success. He had been so poor, and the struggle had been hard. A breath of scandal, hisses from some powerful

and competing faction, and the whole edifice of his fame would go under, that splendid façade so passionately, carefully built. William Michael, who had held the family finances so long, felt this keenly, and perhaps more subterraneously than his brother, deprived as he was of Dante Gabriel's full rich creative outlet. He often used his literary and art criticisms against those who attacked the Pre-Raphaelite group; he used his sober and forceful gifts of critical statesmanship to help his brother and his friends; through him the group were aware of what was going on in publishing and art circles.

Robert Buchanan was a Scotchman, whose gifts if not remarkable were not as faulty as his adversaries indignantly said they were afterwards. He had had personal reasons to dislike the Pre-Raphaelites, though his special prejudice had been Swinburne, and not Rossetti. William Michael stepped into the critical feud between Buchanan and the Pre-Raphaelites and insulted Buchanan in a way that no sensitive and struggling person could endure. Perhaps he was not sensitive in the morbid aesthetic Pre-Raphaelite way. Buchanan was a vigorous social-minded poet who depended on large sweeping, careless effects. In his verse he was in some respects a forerunner of Henley and of Kipling, though in politics he was liberal almost to radicalism and a true humanitarian. His mind, however, was undistinguished, and his control of his jealousies and temper small. He too saw the abyss before him, the abyss into which David Gray, his early dead poet-friend, whom Swinburne had cruelly attacked, had fallen; and he looked around for revenge. He found it in 1871 when he reviewed Rossetti's poems. Dante Gabriel had been very fortunate in the reception so far of the book drawn from his wife's grave. He waited with hidden fear and guilt for ~~some~~ disaster—some secret blow from the dead hand in Highgate Cemetery. Buchanan's attack gave him the psychic wound for which he was waiting. It proved mortal.

Everything had gone so smoothly before. The story about the exhumation of the poems from the grave had been a secret—except in the immediate circle of Rossetti's friends. But of course somebody talked, and when the book appeared it added an air of romance and mystery that sold the book. Then other rumors began to operate with the public, that Rossetti had ill-treated his wife. The official report was that she had died of an overdose of laudanum—but wasn't it true that she had really committed suicide? Besides he was an Italian; and Englishmen were notorious in their contempt of foreigners—Italians especially. Englishmen had at least fought with Frenchmen, who could occasionally put up a good fight, immoral, papist and foreign as they were; but even the genial worldly Trollope had an Italian villain or a villainous Italianate Englishman in some of his best novels.* Even the pious and gentle Cowper in his popular poem on Boadicea, well-meaningly dismisses the Italians as a race of singers (opera singers at that!), far from manly—but harmless when artistically engaged:

Other Romans shall arise,
Heedless of a soldier's name,
Sounds, not arms, shall win the prize,
Harmony the path to fame.

Many centuries before, the wise and experienced Erasmus had noticed, "Alas it is not with the weapons of argument but with those of jealousy and abuse that the battle is fought when any contest arises about poetry." The Buchanan review appeared when it was least expected, a year after the book's publication, and when it was going into a second, third, and fourth printing. Rossetti's friends had sprung nobly into arms for him. As William Gaunt has said in his study of the Pre-Raphaelites, "The

* *Is He Popenjoy?* has a typical Victorian Italianate English villain.

enormous number of Pre-Raphaelites, the Pre-Raphaelite system of mutual aid was fully exploited." William Michael wrote a long powerful review (anonymous of course) in the *Athenæum*. Swinburne did his enthusiastic best in the *Fortnightly Review*. William Morris unwillingly—for he disdained "puffing" and disliked writing reviews—was urged into the critical arena and did his bit. The lesser Pre-Raphaelites were assigned to less important papers. An aura of universal praise, of mystery, glamour, strangeness, and the atmosphere of snobbery that comes with being "in on" the smartest, latest thing in advance-guard art lured the innocent public on, for then as now the public is rarely aware of the competition that goes on behind the scenes: the same frantic striving that goes on in every other profession.

How could such things be among poets so delicate, so above this world? Although Rossetti and his friends were true poets—they were among the best poets of their age—they were also poets of their age; and Rossetti had taught them the value of publicity, had learned it through sad experience. The abyss—the yawning black abyss of poverty and of obscurity—had never yawned before Swinburne and Morris as it did before Dante Gabriel. They were university men with secure unearned incomes—they were Englishmen of the ruling class, the earth did not tremble and recede under their feet as it sometimes did for him when he awoke from his multi-colored dreams.

But the outsiders led by Buchanan knew, and they represented the safe, the sound, the right-minded attitude against foreigners and exotics. There is some reason to believe, as Oscar Wilde said later (he knew many people behind the scenes), that there was a real conspiracy against Rossetti as well as against Swinburne, who had gone out of his way to court abuse. In fact many sensible people felt that the time was ripe to put the Pre-Raphaelites out of the way as an evil influence.

Rossetti was afterwards convinced that Browning and Tennyson and others, who were his friends or had been outwardly friendly, had joined in persecuting him; he thought *The Hunting of the Snark* was written as a secret attack on him. This, many of his biographers have dismissed as a sign of his growing persecution mania.* We know now (from published letters) that Tennyson was not unsympathetic to Buchanan and had half encouraged him; that Browning, though on friendly social terms with Christina and Dante Gabriel, had written to a friend that he thought Rossetti's poems were trifles: "You know I hate the effeminacy of the school—the men that dress up like women—that use obsolete forms and archaic accentuations to seem soft."

This was as wrong as the Buchanan review; it was written at the time of the review, and there is some reason to believe that Rossetti had heard of Browning's attitude. It was whispered around town that Lord de Tabley, and Coventry Patmore who had helped to give the Pre-Raphaelites their start, had endorsed Buchanan, and that Cardinal Newman had written a letter of approval to Buchanan.

To Rossetti, the attack on moral grounds was an extreme shock; and his sense of guilt, his secret drug-taking increased. His sense of persecution, so unreasonable in a man who was so much admired and loved, reached a kind of madness. The feeling of persecution brought on the very thing he feared—more persecutions; for, as Dr. Johnson so wisely said, "It is dangerous to excite the enmity of wit sharpened by malice," when he urged poets not to court the company of their own kind too frequently.

Dante Gabriel's fear that he was going blind like his father increased: he saw strange gray shadows on the wall, he heard

* He was sure that Browning's "Fifine at the Fair" was full of innuendoes about him!

voices accusing him in obscene words, in horrible accents, he heard bells ringing in his ears when he tried to sleep. Morris, who had also been mentioned in the Buchanan attack, had shaken it off with a shrug and gone back to work; Swinburne had delighted in it and had rushed into print and denounced and lampooned Buchanan so thoroughly that that unfortunate (if he deserves to be called "unfortunate") critic found himself without a friend, his defenders being glad to get out of such literary warfare. His reputation muddied beyond repair, he had to publish his books under pseudonyms to escape the barrage of abuse or the cruel silence that they would otherwise have received. He was receiving poetic justice, for was not his famous attack written under an assumed name? William Michael, the ever alert, had discovered his identity and exposed it to the enraged Pre-Raphaelites.

3

Christina Rossetti remained singularly removed from the strain, the abuse of the period when Buchanan's "Fleshly School" attack was troubling the Pre-Raphaelites. No one was so fastidious as Christina on the fine points of morality and decorum. If she had felt that her brother had really "dragged his nuptial couch into the streets" her prayers for his welfare would have increased, and some gentle, tortured, but firm epistle would have been written to him. We know that Swinburne was lavish in his praises of her poems, that he had acknowledged a debt to them for some of his own; but she could never forget his deplorable indulgence in pagan platitudes and shrill blasphemies. She would read any of his books that he sent to her so that she could honestly write to him that she had read them. Then she would paste strips of paper across the indecent and blasphemous passages.

What was the effect on Christina of the Buchanan attack?

We do not know; we know that her name was not mentioned, and in this gesture we see a prophecy of her future fame. It was to be pure, unstained by violent controversy (a sign also that it was not on the highest levels or of the greatest) but alone, unique, quietly surviving. The Buchanan controversy may have increased her determination to keep away from the ugly, heated atmospheres of the professionally literary, from the talk of the noisiest, the most malicious, the most pretentious, whom artists most anxious to perfect their gifts know that they must learn to avoid.

Christina was to reap the benefits of her aloofness from the literary squabbles of her day and to make her appeal to the large silent public that loves fine verse and true art, buys them both, and is little troubled by fashionable shop talk and literary controversies, preferring to make up its own mind. As Cyril Connolly, one of the shrewdest commentators on the modern literary scene, has noticed, there is nothing so dangerous for the aspiring writer as to join those who

attempt to ascend . . . in groups of four or five, who lend a hand to each other and dislodge other climbers from the steps. It is natural that writers should make friends with their contemporaries of talent and express their mutual admiration, but it leads to a succession of services rendered, and however much the writers who help each other deserve it, their gratitude, frequently proclaimed, arouses the envy of those who stand on their own feet, who succeed without collaboration.*

This was something that Dante Gabriel never learned; but Christina could say on the whole that she had succeeded with very little collaboration. Within her own narrow world certain of herself and her gifts, aware as if by instinct of their depths and limitations, she seemed to have reached a serene and safe harbor.

* Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1939 ed.), p. 163.

Outside her windows moved the grim powerful panorama of Victorian England. Or she walked in the street decorously attired in dark colors, her black bonnet fastened under the chin with a wide ribbon of watered silk, a simple and quiet bonnet over the smooth dark hair, a bonnet made somehow poetic and elegant by a row of discreet, small well placed roses over the upturned brim.* The black shawl, the gray bell-shaped taffeta gown frilled at the edges added charm to a face that could never look proper, very English or unexotic, or at home in any city but the City of God.

Let us see Christina as she walked through London with her withdrawn, sensitive, inward look, always feeling that brutal struggle for existence that went on all around her with an intensity more ferocious than ever before in human history. This daughter of a poor poet and a pious gentle governess—both lovers of arts and letters—who lived in polite dependence on her hard-pressed brother, did not need to be told of the struggle for existence, the yawning horror of the abyss that lay in wait on the doorstep of every wage-earner's family. Dante Gabriel's success had saved them, and William Michael's labors. But the fear may have been expressed in her shy dream-walking movements, in the intense morbid sensibility of her verse, in her passionate religious devotions as she turned to God, the symbol of security in a shifting, trembling world. God was Father and Lover, the Rock Immovable, the Sheltering Arms, under whose invisible gaze sin, death, fear, illness, poverty disappeared and were swallowed up in victory. She has left us her concept of Life and Time in her little devotional volume *Letter and Spirit*: "God inhabiteth eternity, man Time. God wills to constitute man a sharer of His eternity, and in preparation He graciously invites man to devote to Him a section of Time."

This section of Time that was only her earthly existence,

* See the photograph in Violet Hunt, *The Wife of Rossetti*, p. 242.

she devoted very fully to Him. With such an Ideal in mind she overcame her sloth, her chronic melancholy, her fear of writing, her fear of publication, her fear of the unutterable silences, the irrelevant abuse, the equally irrelevant praise of the professional critics, which had once troubled her. She developed that much admired Victorian virtue, industry—an industry that was never allowed to rest. When she could not write poetry (for she never forced her Muse) she wrote children's books, fiction—some of the worst and most serious novels and short stories ever written by a poet of great gifts—and religious tracts; she visited the Home for Fallen Women with her sister Maria and read to and exhorted the unfortunate creatures, who probably thought that these foreign-looking and intense spinsters were very odd indeed. When she returned home there were always scrapbooks to make for children who were in the hospitals: laborious and careful pastings up of pretty pictures clipped from magazines and newspapers, and interesting or edifying items that might attract a sick child. It consumed time; the days, months, and years went up in a slow flame of usefully useless labor. The things she did were never the things she liked to do, but what she felt ought to be done. Duty, stern daughter, descended in the voluminous garments and trim bonnet of a Victorian spinster. Although Duty spoke in the voice of God, the bonnet was trimmed with paradisiacal roses small but perfect.

4

In 1871 a painful malady broke in upon Christina's frantic quiet. It was that strange glandular ailment known as Graves's disease. The disease, still obscure to medical science, was then almost impossible to cure. It appeared after she had suffered what appeared to be a nervous breakdown, and most of all she became conscious of the disfigurement of the body, that resulted

from the malady, her shaking hands, her protruding eyeballs, her fearfully brown skin, her increased weight. She was no longer pleasant to look at, no longer ethereal and slim. A note of regret, of feminine vanity even, appears in her letters. A fat poetess, she thought, was a very unsympathetic being. She was conscious of her shaky handwriting, her swollen throat, but it was at least two years before the worst signs of the illness appeared. Then she became more of a recluse than ever, more inward if possible. Never a great reader, she turned torpidly to books—not books of devotion, but fiction, contemporary poetry. As soon as the nightmare of physical discomfort and mental torture ceased she turned to writing again.

The ever faithful Cayley was a constant visitor, lending her books, discussing them with her. On returning from Cambridge where he had been attending a birthday party for his little niece (a favorite of Christina's) he had borrowed a copy of Joaquin Miller's *Songs of the Sierras*. He lent it to Christina, who returned it without comment. Miller, like many picturesque Americans before him, had made a stir in English literary circles. His colorful personality, his novel subject matter, struck the Rossetti brothers as exciting and vivid, and they helped spread his fame in England. But Christina was unmoved, and when Miller called on her and proposed to dedicate his next book to her and her brothers, she expressed herself with a mild firmness. She wrote to William Michael asking him to be sure that *her* name was not used. It would never do. Some of Miller's religious poems struck her as—well, not truly religious. She would say nothing of his merits or demerits—perhaps she and Cayley had discussed them already. But it was understood that she wanted no dedication. It was not modesty alone that dictated this, for later when Swinburne wished to dedicate a book to her she gave gracious though whimsical assent. One feels that in the instance of Joaquin Miller she asserted her own integrity even when it

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came in conflict with that of her brothers. Her taste, narrow and restricted though it appeared, was still her own.

Anthologies and magazines were beginning to ask for her work. She would have been pleased to earn the money they sometimes offered, but was scrupulous, discriminating, and firm when the occasion warranted. At her brothers' and the editor's request, she had sent a poem sometime in 1871 to the *University Magazine*, a lively new literary paper that contained the most "advanced" names of the period. Its list of contributors made it one of the scattered forerunners of the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*, magazines that would not have amused Christina. When she looked over the *University* magazine a hasty and courteous note went off at once to the editor:

Dear Sir

Your letter puts me in an embarrassment, not from any defect in it but (let me hope) from a misapprehension on my own part.

No. 1 of your new series is the only no. of the University Magazine which I have seen, therefore my impression is based upon *it* alone. Allow me to speak from that impression, to express my apprehension that my one—no. [sic] colleagues are of a school of thought antagonistic to my own. If so, I am sure you will kindly set me free from my quasi-engagement to write on demand for the Magazine: for I never could be at my ease or happy in literary company with persons who look down upon what I look up to. I have not *played* at Xtianity, and therefore I cannot play at unbelief.

Yet if I am making a mistake in my judgment it will require no slight forgiveness on your part to forgive me: may I ask so much?*

Yet she was not without a touch of humor, as when she wrote to William Michael announcing that "a human being wanting to set one of my things to music, has at last fixed not on 'When I Am Dead' but on 'Grown and Flown.' "

* Janet C. Troxell, *Three Rossettis*, pp. 159–160.

Among Christina's friends in this period we find the artist Frederic Shields, probably one of the closest friends of her later and middle years. A Cayleyan quaintness and earnestness endeared him to her, and his paintings and stained-glass windows admired in his day—so dim in our memory now—found favor in her eyes. Their chief bond was a religious agreement, their fervor and faith meeting in a flame of mutual encouragement.

It is a balm to my mother and me [Christina wrote] to hear of a man of genius who is also a Christian, who speaks of the personages and facts of the Bible as of personages and facts, who brings love and devotion to his work for the glory of God. Pray do not think me overbold in expressing myself, but you well know how many men of genius think and speak otherwise.

Frederic Shields must have glowed at this tribute, for other "men of genius" thought he was suffering from religious mania and found it difficult to talk to him, and his own wife found him too difficult to live with. But to Christina and her mother he proved a loyal, a helpful friend. Another friend who became an almost intimate in this period was the Reverend C. L. Dodgson, "Lewis Carroll," whose unworldliness and quaint humor must have made her again think of Cayley. She had made his acquaintance at Dante Gabriel's house in Chelsea, where they had both admired the artist's pet wombat, who had a habit of sleeping on the dining-room table, and may have been immortalized as the dormouse in *Alice in Wonderland*. Dodgson's photographs and conversation delighted Christina. Unworldly, humorous, erudite, and not unedifying, his conversation was the kind she liked best, though to Dante Gabriel he was merely one of the quaint personages he liked to collect, as he collected the wombat and other odd animals. William Michael, who was becoming more and more serious as he became interested in so-

cialism, found Dr. Dodgson's quaintness tiresome and too whimsical for his taste. But to Christina and her mother he had a special value; he too was a devout and orthodox churchman, and Christina, like Dr. Johnson, felt that the priests of her church should be treated with honor, respect, and no criticism.

Her later choice in friends ran more and more to those who were zealous in good works, and whose beliefs harmonized with her own; those who merely flattered her with admiration for her own gifts, left her indifferent. About this time Ellen A. Proctor noticed Christina at a literary party (one of the few she attended), aloof and a little out of place in the vivacious and sharp-tongued chatter. Discovering who she was, she approached her in the right way, with praise for a devotional poem that Christina herself liked and that few had praised or noticed. There is no surer way to a poet's heart. Miss Proctor, a serious-minded woman addicted to good works, was taken to Christina's heart and lived to write a little memoir of the poet she so sincerely admired. Together the two women attended Monday night meetings of the Factory Girls' Club, which was under the special care of R. K. Arbuthnot, a clergyman whom Christina particularly respected and found very sound in points of doctrine. In a letter to Miss Proctor we get a picture of Christina's adventures in social work; they seem to have been confined to an earnest effort to improve the morals and manners of the working girl, and one is afraid that she left working conditions to God and His infinite mercy. One would give something to penetrate the veil concealing the erring girl alluded to in a letter of 1875, who disappeared leaving two nervous well-meaning spinsters brooding over her: "What a dreadful account you give of —. Poor thing, may she have the grace to retrieve her lost ground and break off so ruinous a habit. I fear the tendency is fearfully difficult to cope with, especially in women."

Perhaps the "ruinous habit" was drink; but Christina, who had so painfully conquered her weaknesses, found it difficult to learn that virtue is not eagerly sought by others. It was much pleasanter to continue one's correspondence with Frederic Shields or "Lewis Carroll," both "geniuses" and good men. But the sight of small children coming home late from work stirred her to protest, and her feeling for animals helpless under the brutalities of man moved her to passionate anger. She wrote strong letters endorsing the anti-vivisection bills and protesting against child labor. Her sympathy for all kinds of suffering was that of a true poet, keen and imaginative.

Augusta Webster, a much praised poet of the period whose gifts were often compared to Robert Browning's (though they seem now to have resembled Mrs. Browning's more), was one of the first leaders of the Suffrage Society, and she tried to enlist Christina's support in this pioneer effort for women's rights. Anyone who had read Christina's poetry or prose might have left well enough alone; but Mrs. Webster was insensitive as we can see in her poetry, and Christina's letter no doubt left her bewildered rather than deflated. There is no better comment on a certain side of Christina than the letter to Mrs. Webster in which she wrote:

Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood, unalterable distinction between men and women, their positions, duties, privileges? Not arrogating to myself, but most earnestly desiring to attain to the character of a humble orthodox Xtian, so it does appear to me.

And later:

Many who have thought more and done more than myself share your views; and yet they are not mine. I do not think the present social movements tend on the whole to uphold Xtianity, or that the influence of some of our most prominent and gifted women is exerted

in that direction; and thus thinking, I cannot aim at “women’s rights.” Influence and responsibility are such solemn matters that I shall not excuse myself to you for abiding by my conviction. Yet in contradicting you I am contradicting one I admire.

6

In the year 1873 we find Christina a guest of the William Morrises at Kelmscott, where she met Theodore Watts, afterward Watts-Dunton, who had a gift for gaining the affection and good will of many important contemporaries. A scholar, a gentleman of some attainments and learning, a poet of sorts, and a critic of much influence, he had been a solicitor by profession. Through his professional services he had met Swinburne —whose housemate he became—and had won the friendship of Rossetti and William Morris. But it was his good sense, pompous but warm kindness (toward those whom it was rewarding to be kind) that endeared him to the great men who were his friends. The rising young poets thought harshly of him, and in another generation Max Beerbohm would give him a not unkindly immortality in his essay “No. 2 The Pines.” On Swinburne’s death Wilfrid Blunt set down caustically in his diary opinions that were privately expressed by many others in that literary milieu whose good will Watts-Dunton had not troubled to gain:

“The greatest lyric poet of the English tongue,” is my judgment of him . . . Beyond being a poet, he was almost nothing. He never enjoyed his life, wasting his youth on drink and his old age on Theodore Watts. . . . The last thirty years of his life have been stultified in a suburban villa at Putney with Watts-Dunton, who had used him as an advertisement for his own literary trash.*

This is somewhat unkind to Theodore Watts-Dunton. With his gift of making close friendships he had the fatal gift of

* Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries*, Part II, pp. 242–243.

making an enemy of almost everyone who was not his friend. Christina liked him, and he liked her poetry almost as much as he liked Jean Ingelow's, which he had praised highly in reviews. Later, as Christina's reputation increased, he was able to remember more and more his conversations with her at Kelmscott; and they are among the most charming of reminiscences. Dante Gabriel, who visited it with her, showed no interest in the lovely old house or its flat, low, dreaming landscape; but Christina, Watts-Dunton remembered, was always out in the garden, and very early too, much to the surprise of her brother, who liked to sleep late and thought that living in the country would drive him mad after a week or two. Watts-Dunton, who loved Nature to distraction, approved of Christina:

At Kelmscott, for instance, nothing would make [Dante Gabriel] more surprised than to see Christina and myself lingering over a patch of those lovely many-colored mosses upon the old apple tree in the garden which looked as if embossed with miniature forests in jewel-work.

The house with its medieval furniture, gray brick walls, and lovely garden had become a show place. Aesthetically minded young couples learned eagerly about its furnishings and tried as far as they were able to imitate them. Through this dreamlike splendor moved the legendary master of the house, William Morris, often blunt to the point of rudeness and yet like Dr. Johnson's estimate of himself sometimes "well bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity." Everyone around him seemed to be lifted by his energy, both electric and creative, that made all his friends feel doubly alive. By his side moved the equally mythical Janey in her flowing aesthetic robes, dark-eyed, divinely tall, forest-haired like Rossetti's portrait of her as Proserpine descending into darkness and carrying light into the dark. The rumor of his infatuation for her had even then spread

into London and one wonders what strange irritation arising from this gossip filled the mild heavy air of Kelmscott.

Christina's presence must have been a relief—and Watts-Dunton's bustling officiousness that veiled all his words and actions in shimmering second-rate poetry. We know that the host and hostess were not disconsolate when Dante Gabriel left Kelmscott, for William Morris was growing a little tired of the Pre-Raphaelite pieties and splendors, and even his friend Burne-Jones (through whose hands the Pre-Raphaelite visions poured in a gentle thin, brightly colored, and modulated trickle), could not quite restore the old dream. Charming as Dante Gabriel was, his golden voice no longer spoke to Morris in the language he was most anxious to hear.

Many years later Morris, looking around at his tapestry-hung medieval-walled house, surprised Lady Gregory by saying that he had decided that a simple whitewashed, uncluttered wall was best of all. He was lost now in another dream where all poverty, all suffering were to be eliminated through socialism and medieval craftsmanship. In his absorption in the better world of the future he lost track of individual loves and hates and perhaps forgot to make those delicate and spontaneous gestures of affection that keep a wife happy. Rossetti, whose private generosity and human sympathies were as large as his feeling for advanced social doctrines was small, had noticed that he never gave a penny to a beggar and seemed singularly unmoved by individual suffering. He was indeed a forerunner of a type of radical that the twentieth century has found only too common.

Although Christina and her mother visited Kelmscott when Dante Gabriel was also a visitor, it is doubtful if any real intimacy could have sprung up between her and William Morris, who was sinking into his all-embracing vision of the future socialist state; and Jane Morris, sorrowful, dreamy, and remote,

must have brought back the memory of Elizabeth Siddal. Later, when the young poet Katharine Tynan asked if Elizabeth Siddal was really as beautiful as she appeared in Dante Gabriel's paintings, Christina answered, "Lizzie and Janey Morris were brides in the same year, and no one could decide which was more beautiful," thus almost unconsciously linking together the two important women in her brother's life.

7

We have other glimpses of Christina Rossetti in her middle years of modest but assured fame. Her reserve and humility in company have already been commented upon; but they became almost ostentatious now, as if she was secretly fighting a powerful pride, a self-esteem that she felt was sinful. "Upon her reputation as a poetess she never presumed [wrote William Michael], nor did she ever volunteer an allusion to any of her performances. In a roomful of mediocrities she consented to seem the most mediocre and most modest of all." This is indeed a remarkable performance, as one can testify who has noted the vanities of many poets; but it must have annoyed the "mediocrities," who doubtless never thought of themselves as mediocrities. Against such a background we can see Christina as she appeared in photographs (not paintings) of the time, short, rather plump, her smooth fine hair glistening darkly under a black bonnet, her deep hazel eyes modestly lowered and yet keenly observant, with her air of good breeding and worldly politeness.

Virginia Woolf has immortalized an episode of this period in her essay on Christina Rossetti. The scene was the house of Mrs. Virtue Tebbs (truly wonderful name!), the beautiful sister of Seddon the Pre-Raphaelite artist and wife of a friend of Rossetti, who kept a salon much frequented by the artists and writers of the day. On Christina's rare appearance at one of the

receptions, she held firmly to her motto, "Grant me the lowest place," and no doubt sat quietly unnoticed in a corner while the usual literary conversation went on. No doubt the conversation had turned to poets and poetry, and the usual banal things had been said, when suddenly a small dark-robed woman got up and said in a firm voice, "I am Christina Rossetti!" and then retired into an obscurity now made conspicuous. Whether it was the superb defense of poetry that Mrs. Woolf thought it was, or whether Christina's long suppressed ego flamed into revolt and demanded to be seen and heard, we cannot tell. Perhaps the impulse was the same that made her equally shy friend Charles Cayley break out of his isolation in a drawing room by approaching the lady nearest him with questions about the Gulf Stream.

Another amusing glimpse of Christina's "scrupulosity" is given by Sir Edmund Gosse. In 1874 he undertook to secure influential signatures to a public protest against the destruction of part of the New Forest. Swinburne, who had given his signature, had suggested that Christina be approached. Christina read Gosse's petition, approved, and took up her pen to sign, and then stopped. "Are you sure they do not intend to build churches on the land?" After an earnest discussion Gosse convinced her that they had no such intention. She took up her pen and wrote "Christina R" and then stopped. "And no school-houses?" Gosse assured her that there were to be no school-houses. Christina then completed her signature.

If her fame was growing it was (as is often the case with unostentatious talents) sometimes praised and admired for the wrong reasons. It must have strained all her humility to find herself praised in the same breath with Jean Ingelow, Mrs. Edward Thomas, Mrs. Louis Belloc, and Eliza Cook, for she was a discriminating person and, whatever her admiration for Jean Ingelow, one would like to think that she knew her own su-

periority to that poet. But no doubt she took these things without a sigh, for it began to be noticed about this time that she was cultivating an unusual cheerfulness, amounting almost to breeziness, that seemed foreign to her character. She had decided that it was her Christian duty not to let her melancholy absorb her, that true Christians should express the inner happiness of their convictions in their outer manner. "I was a very melancholy girl, but now I am a cheerful old woman," she told a skeptical young visitor who had heard tales of her chronic melancholia.

Between writing poetry and religious tracts she would walk out in thick boots and short woolen skirts to visit the poor or sick, or the Magdalen Home for Fallen Women of which she was still an associate. William Michael states that her overscrupulousity made her shut her mind to all things save the Bible and the admonitions of priests; but he was a freethinker and, though very kind, was often impatient with his sister's beliefs when they led to extremes. Christina might have echoed the statement of the eighteenth century poet Collins who, when found shortly before his death with a Bible in his hand, said, "I have but one book but that is the best." William Michael also speaks of her habits of composition, which remained entirely unchanged till her end: "If something came which she found suggestive of verse she put it into verse. Though it came easily she never forgot the slight touch of 'right and fine' execution though that came easily too." But it may not have been as easy as it appeared.

8

While scarcely recovered from Graves's disease, at a moment when Christina felt at her weakest and gloomiest, she published one of her most charming and gayest books. This is her book of children's verse called *Sing-Song*, which, written by a real poet, has the delightful quality of the best children's verse of that golden age of children's books. *Sing-Song* seems to ask

for drawings by Kate Greenaway; but an equally fine illustrator, Arthur Hughes, undertook to illustrate it. Even Christina was delighted and wrote to Dante Gabriel: "What a charming design is the ring of elves producing the fairy ring—also the apple tree casting the apples—also the three dancing girls with the angel—kissing one—also I liked the crow-soaked grey stared at by his peers."

One gets the atmosphere of *Sing-Song* from this brief note—and yet not quite, for, on rereading, it seems like a book made for such grave precocious children as the young Rossettis themselves, children born with an understanding of poetry. This is not difficult poetry; on the contrary, the verses are limpid and clear, but the undertones are full of subtleties, the cadences become Christina Rossetti cadences in spite of themselves and ring out a music that will be best felt by the "special" child, or by a child whose nursery is full of old Italian or Pre-Raphaelite paintings. A little girl in the teens of the twentieth century, reading in a crowded New York public school, discovered some of the Christina Rossetti *Sing-Song* poems and became for the first time conscious of beauties and nuances, sounds and shadings of the English tongue. The English language, which had seemed foreign and difficult, became a thing to love, because the emotions aroused by the small poems were the emotions aroused by real poetry.

Sing-Song is not the most characteristic of Christina's books; but it should be read as a guide to some of her most delightful graces. The children in the poems are real children, rosy, politely gay, even if precocious, as we have said before, and oversensitive (they are a poet's babies), and few will deny their charm. This is curious because in Christina's other books for children we are conscious of all the Polidori governesses that ever lived; the children seem to walk on stilts and talk in the quaint literary language of some antique schoolroom. Christina

was not well known for her love of children; but the baby to whom the *Sing-Song* volume was dedicated was the nephew of her beloved Cayley, and for a moment one likes to think she may have thought of herself as holding another baby of the same blood in her arms.

9

On April 28, 1873, Christina wrote to Dante Gabriel that, just before she and her mother started off on a rare holiday to Hastings, Mrs. Ford Madox Brown and her stepdaughter Lucy had called on them. "What a delightful person she is!" she wrote, as if she already knew that Lucy was to be an important person in their lives. A short time afterward the engagement of William Michael Rossetti to Lucy Brown was announced and caused satisfaction to both families. The ladies of the Rossetti family had known Lucy Brown since her childhood. In the days of his worst poverty and struggle Ford Madox Brown would fetch his motherless little girl from the schools where he had to board her, and often he was delighted to have her stay with the Rossettis. Later Maria and Francesca Rossetti took the slim dark-eyed and intelligent-looking little girl under their wing and, remembering that they had been governesses, helped with her education.

The Rossetti influence stayed with Lucy Brown, but it was not that of the saintly Francesca or Maria, or the devout dreamy Christina, or the fascinating Dante Gabriel. The semi-Bohemian atmosphere of her home had given her a respect for the solid orderly virtues and had also taught her to temper art with reason. It was to the serene and industrious William Michael that she turned for advice on literature, art, religion. For she was serious-minded, with a real gift for painting and some gift for writing. Her father had taught her that the arts alone were important. William Michael's agnosticism influenced her more

than the Rossetti women would have wished, but on the whole, they approved of her. She was intelligent, high-minded, well bred, handsome in a dark-browed, fiery way, and had a high sense of duty. She would not be "flighty"; though poor, her poverty was the poverty of an artist's daughter, not that of a waif from nowhere like poor Lizzie Siddal. They had known Lucy and could testify to her educational achievements and her gifts as an artist. If only she were less of an agnostic! But on the whole she was welcomed, for William Michael who, approaching middle age after years of self-sacrifice for his family, at last felt that he could afford the domestic happiness of other men. Gracious almost to the point of Chinese humility is the letter Christina wrote to Lucy Brown on her engagement:

I should like to be a dozen years younger, and worthier every way of becoming your sister; but, such as I am, be sure of my loving welcome to you as my dear sister and friend. I hope William will be all you desire; and, as I know what he has been to me, a most loving and generous brother, I am not afraid of his being less than a devoted husband to you. May love, peace, and happiness be yours together in this world, and together much more in the next; and, when earth is an anteroom to heaven (may it be so, of God's mercy to us all), earth itself is full of beauty and goodness.

After his marriage William Michael brought his wife home to live with his mother and sister. The year before, Maria had joined the Anglican sisterhood in which, for the brief three years of life that remained to her, she found the richest fulfillment of her religious emotions and intellectual gifts. Though ailing and aging, she began to look (in her latest portraits) like a cheerful, bustling Italian peasant woman who had entered a convent, but like a woman of intellect—we remember when we look at the fine forehead and the deep pictured eyes.

Life with her brother and her new sister-in-law was no bed of roses for Christina. The young bride found her religiosity difficult, and her spinsterish ways a trial. The ways of artists or poets had no mystery for Lucy, and, after all, she considered herself an artist too. Did she not paint pictures in the Pre-Raphaelite manner? Later she would write a biography of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, a lady whom Christina might have prayed for but could not wholly admire. Christina coughed and coughed in the next room when the young Mrs. Rossetti gave a dinner party, and was restless at night when she occupied a room near her brother and his wife. Then she would write her poetry at odd hours and look grieved when Lucy expressed religious opinions that ran counter to her own beliefs.

A pathetic letter to William Michael throws some light on the delicate situation:

My sleeping in the library cannot but have made evident to you how improper a person I am to occupy any room next a dining-room. My cough (which surprised Lucy, as I found afterwards, the other day at dinner) . . . makes it unseemly for me to be continually and unavoidably within earshot of Lucy and her guests.

Christina went on to tell him that her doctor, the famous Sir William Jenner, had told her that she was suffering from heart complaint, and that the throat enlargement was a result of her long trial with Graves's disease. Perhaps it would be better if they did not live together under one roof? "We believe that from all sources we shall have enough between us, and you know that our standard of comfort does not include all the show demanded by modern luxury." The two remaining Polidori aunts were living at 12 Bloomsbury Square, and Christina and her mother intended to live with them, thus securing "no

The Angel of Renunciation—The Pre-Raphaelite Scene 199
despicable amount of cheerful companionship, and of ready aid in sickness."

Poor Maria was sick, was getting worse daily, was dying. Dante Gabriel had been sorry when she had joined the All Saints Sisterhood, for he considered her as the most cheerful and competent member of the household. Poor Maria! Her life had been sad enough, from the time when as a girl in her teens she had tried to help the family by going out as a governess, had failed, had almost died of homesickness, and had run home to that family circle where alone she had felt herself to be truly admired and esteemed, and understood. On November 24, 1876, she died of "an internal tumor with dropsical complications," aged forty-nine. The bright mind, the ardently acquired store of learning, the capacity for love and happiness that she never quite realized seemed to perish with her perishing frame. Her *In the Shadow of Dante*, scholarly, distinguished, and yet strangely colorless, alone remained as a testimony to her fine gifts. Christina in an entry in her reading journal *Time Flies* recorded that when Maria's body was lowered into the earth the gray day was suddenly brightened with a gleam of sunlight that made a miniature rainbow in the eyes of the mourners. She remembered Maria's cheerfulness in facing death, and tried to face her own grief with equal fortitude. At another time she wrote, "Christians are called to be like stars, luminous, steadfast, majestic, attractive," and no doubt she would have applied this to her sister. Remembering Maria, she turned with renewed fervor to her devotions and more than ever found consolation in religion. Poetry was too great a pleasure, an almost sensuous indulgence; one ought perhaps to propitiate God by doing something in useful uncongenial prose. There was the tract she had promised to do for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. It was unspectacular work, but a work that might turn a doubting heart to God, fortify others in their

orthodoxy. It was not always easy, for the spirit was often stronger than the flesh. Sometimes she stopped to exhort herself before an uncongenial piece of work, as we see in the January 27 entry of *Time Flies*:

Suppose our duty of the moment is to write: why do we not write?—
Because we cannot summon up anything original, or striking, or picturesque, or eloquent, or brilliant.

But is a subject set before us?—It is.

Is it true?—It is.

Do we understand it?—Up to a certain point we do.

Is it worthy of meditation?—Yes, and prayerfully.

Is it worthy of exposition?—Yes, indeed.

Why then not begin?—

“From pride and vain glory, Good Lord, deliver us!”

In 1876 Christina with her mother and the two aunts moved into another house at 30 Torrington Square, where she was to live the remaining eighteen years of her life. Like the other houses that she had lived in, this was a commonplace house of the customary dull brown brick. Its interior like its exterior impressed visitors only by its somberness, a draped and muffled atmosphere that even had its charm and distinction to those upon whom Christina's spirit had cast a spell. Some fine pieces of eighteenth century furniture and some paintings presented by Dante Gabriel cast a glow over the drawing room where Christina sat with her mother and read to her from Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford* or the then almost living gossip of Benjamin Haydon's brilliant but depressing *Autobiography and Journals*. Christina and her mother would sigh to think that dear Gabriel had been so fortunate as an artist, for at the time he took up painting as a profession Haydon's tragic fate had been held up as a warning to every aspirant to the art. Here was a large spirit intellectually above the Academy nobodies who had (Haydon believed) hounded him to suicide. The Academy nobodies had

died in honor and affluence. Was Haydon's talent less than that of the successful Archer Shee, or Augustus Egg, or William Hilton, or Keats's friend Severn, whose amiability and charm and pliability had brought him fat commissions and delightful sinecures? Yet the Abyss had risen and swallowed up a man who had never learned to compromise, or to cringe. If Haydon had only known it he could have made fame and fortune as a writer, and Mrs. Rossetti might have thought that only William Blake and Dante Gabriel had practiced the two arts with success in England. Poor Haydon! His autobiography had almost scared her daughter-in-law's father away from painting. William Michael and Christina no longer troubled her mind, but Dante Gabriel's destinies seemed clouded from time to time, by something almost as dreadful as the shadow of unsuccess that he had so triumphantly surmounted.

Slowly, very slowly now, with calm finality, with many reflections, we shall hear the clock of mortal time ticking off the years at 30 Torrington Square.



The Recluse of Torrington Square: Middle Years and Fame

NUMBER 30 Torrington Square, in which Christina Rossetti was to spend the last years of her life, seemed like many other houses in that quarter of Bloomsbury. From the descriptions of the house and its interiors that have survived, we can almost visit it in spirit. *Torrington Oblong*, Dante Gabriel thought, would have been a more accurate name. The dull-colored brick house was of three stories and seemed even higher because of its narrowness. So dingy and sooty did it appear that its dark cool interiors brought some relief. Here one could sink into the padded silence and forget the world outside with its un-picturesque sobriety. At the entrance, stone steps led into a narrow hall. How narrow and steep the staircase! To the right was a large drawing room, Victorian in its muffled draperies and yet touched off with a shabby elegance because of the few fine pieces of furniture. Chippendale chairs and a bureau (*Polidori inheritances*), a few brilliant paintings by Dante Gabriel, the fine crystal-shining chandelier (also a Polidori legacy), the faded but lovely Chinese wallpaper. A small mahogany desk with a tall glass bookcase held most of Christina's library, and that library had been mainly chosen by her mother. The devotion between mother and daughter grew stronger with the years, and in the portrait of Christina and her mother painted by Dante Gabriel at this period the two women ap-

pear at first to be almost of an age. Christina, in spite of the melancholy that appears from under her too prominent lowered eyelids, has now attained some of her mother's granite strength of personality; but the strong, placid sweetness that shines from the eyes of the older woman is missing in Christina, so wild, so keen, so restless seems her dark gaze.

2

William Michael remembered that Christina had done most of her writing in her small bedroom which contained a bed, a large marble-topped dresser, a washstand, and a chair. In the corner was a small bookcase which held books read more frequently by her mother than herself: books by Maria Edgeworth, Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell (a great favorite), Sir Walter Scott. On the walls were a few portraits, among them the small, delicate, amateurish but honest portrait of Christina by Collinson. The fragile girl in the portrait was like another self, like a trying and too sickly daughter of the restless middle-aged woman with the firm chin and thickening figure that looked on it with mournful heavy-lidded eyes.

What had happened to Collinson? It is doubtful if in her later years Christina thought of him often; but when an editor approached her for religious poems to be included in an anthology of devotional verse her fellow contributor to *The Germ* came to mind and she recommended Collinson's *Seven Sorrowful Mysteries*. From memory (so she said) she re-created an early poem of his which is indeed moving and makes one wonder how much of it may be her own.* If it is indeed all Collinson's one is forced to concede that this much abused young man did possess some genuine talent:

* Under Jan. 24 in *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*, she attributes the poem to Collinson.

"Give Me thy heart." I said: Can I not make
 Abundant sacrifice to Him Who gave
 Life, health, possessions, friends, of all I have,
 All but my heart once given? Lord, do not take
 It from its happy home or it will break.

"Give me thy broken heart." Can love enslave?
 Must it be forced to look beyond the grave
 For its fruition? Lord, for Thy Love's sake
 Let this thing be: as two streams journeying on
 Melt into one and widen to the sea,
 So let two souls love-burdened make but one,
 And one full heart rest all its love on Thee.
 "Alas, frail man, for thine infirmity!
 Thy God is love."—Then, Lord, Thy Will be done.

These sentiments were still sentiments that she felt deeply; daily she struggled to renounce the demands of a too ardent nature, daily she strove for complete self-abnegation.

✓ It was certainly of Collinson and not of Cayley that she was thinking when she wrote one of her most dramatic poems, "Love Lies Bleeding," in the early 1870's. She saw him once, she may have seen him again passing one of his old haunts, the British Museum; and absent-mindedly he may have passed her by without recognition. The reawakened memory might have brought up a long forgotten, agonized sweetness, and a wave of longing for a youth that had never known a true springtime:

Love, that is dead and buried, yesterday
 Out of his grave rose up before my face;
 No recognition in his look, no trace
 Of memory in his eyes dust-dimmed and grey;
 While I, remembering, found no word to say,
 But felt my quickened heart leap in its place;
 Caught afterglow thrown back from long-set days,
 Caught echoes of all music past away.
 Was this indeed to meet?—I mind me yet

In youth we met when hope and love were quick,
We parted with hope dead but love alive:
I mind me how we parted then heart-sick,
Remembering, loving, hopeless, weak to strive:—
Was this to meet? Not so, we have not met.

Cayley called often bringing books and flowers, and occasionally Dante Gabriel or William Michael would send her a new book of poems for criticism and her judgment was timidly fair. Dante Gabriel, like Robert Bridges and Gerard Manley Hopkins, was trying to gain a public for the work of the Reverend Richard Watson Dixon, a friend of Burne-Jones who had officiated at the wedding of Jane and William Morris. Dixon, fine, intelligent, and sensitive, was well liked, and everyone who knew him felt that there was more beauty and greatness in his poetry than met the eye; but Christina, writing modestly that she too saw beauties, put her finger on the fatal flaw: "Don't you think that the rock Mr. Dixon tends to split on is dryness? You see the way my verdict inclines but I honor yours." For "dryness," or dullness, makes all gifts and graces vain.

Christina's days, though seemingly uneventful, were full enough. Her poetry, her religion, her good works among the poor, the evenings spent reading to her mother and nursing her sick aunts, all made the withdrawn days, months, years, full of activity that seemed no activity at all. Then there were her growing fears. Her mother's failing health, Dante Gabriel's drug-taking and his mistresses (never to be mentioned), the free-thinking (no, not atheism) of William Michael and Lucy Rossetti, all added to the day's distresses and the night's fears. Christina's devotional journals express some of her thoughts and her strict habit of self-examination. Outwardly she appeared poised—although perhaps a little too intense, still a soul at peace with itself; but daily she wounded herself with painful self-distrust:

From fastidiousness, exclusiveness, pride, conceit, Thou Lord Who condescendest to us all, deliver us.

From undue curiosity, vain hankerings, idle words, wasted, irrecoverable time, Thou Lord Who understandest our thoughts, long before, deliver us.

From false fear and false shame, Thou Lord Who art not ashamed to call us brethren deliver us.

And so in a round cycle of prayer, meditation, of household duties and self-examination, of long talks with her mother, the clock ticked off its moments. If Lady Burne-Jones describes her at this period as "gently caustic of tongue," someone else has described how occasionally in intimate conversation there would arise in her "the blithe cheerfulness which one can put over one's sadness like a bright shining veil."

She was writing some of her best devotional poems now, poems even to this day less well known than they ought to be. Now and then in her dreams of the heavenly country, visions of a transcendent landscape would glow with the old imagery; but as usual her landscapes, fruits, and flowers were visionary and not of this world. A friend who noticed her frail health and continual exhaustion told her that she would be happier in the quiet of the country. Christina answered that she felt more at home in the peopled city and quoted Bacon: "The souls of the living are the beauty of the world." She was attracted and repelled by the spectacle of the world and, like all lonely and introverted people, experienced from the noise, the busy life around her a sense of warmth and human contact. Theodore Watts-Dunton remembered her delightful silvery laugh at his insistence that she ought to go to the country and receive fresh inspiration from nature. She answered politely that she *ought* to have received inspiration from nature in the country, but she actually wrote better in London. Perhaps her celestial landscape is at its best and most characteristic in "An Old World Thicket," a poem written in 1862

or earlier. Dante's *oscura selva* is her theme, and she too, prophetically approaching the midway of her life, finds herself (awake or sleeping) alone in a sacred wood. Visions of beauty and despair, pictures of the past and present rise before her, transmuted into her peculiar music; and through the music we hear her characteristic voice. Never has she found a more haunting picture of her favorite bird theme:

Such birds they seemed as challenged each desire;
Like spots of azure heaven upon the wing,
Like downy emeralds that alight and sing,
Like actual coals of fire.

Through the bird-music, through her images of widening waters, through her late summer overripe landscape the old melancholy, the old despair is heard again. The "universal sound of lamentation" reaches her through the enchanted landscape. Again we hear the often to be repeated cry of frustration.

Ah me, the bitterness of such revolt,
All impotent, all hateful, and all hate,
That kicks and breaks itself against the bolt
Of an imprisoning fate,
And vainly shakes, and cannot shake the gate.

But again the sun rises and again all nature shines in supernatural beauty.

Each twig was tipped with gold, each leaf was edged
And veined with gold from the gold-flooded west.

Again and again in later years she repeats the theme of the frustrated spirit seeking peace (and seeking it in vain) in a celestial landscape.

3

Her "scrupulosity" became annoying to Dante Gabriel. When she sent him her new poems he would arise from his drug-soaked dreams to offer advice or praise with the old brilliance. As usual she listened to him, thanked him fervently, and went her own way. The reprinting of a poem she did not approve of in an anthology kept her awake at night, the fear that she might have been unjust and severe to someone filled her with tortured remorse. She wrote to Dante Gabriel on such an occasion: "Do not laugh. I am weighed upon by the responsibility of all one does, or does not do; besides I think our dearest mother inclines in the same direction." Though she cultivated humility to a degree of spiritual arrogance she was pleased and proud when her publisher, the poetry-loving Alexander Macmillan said "Yes" to *A Pageant and Other Poems* in the spring of 1881 "without asking to see the manuscript or making a single inquiry as to its bulk or subject." It was indeed a pleasure to know that her poems were so well liked.

She had reason to embrace her small pleasures, for her mother's health was now seriously impaired and the thought of losing her mother made her heart stand still. Life without that placid overwhelming strength seemed impossible. She arranged for a little holiday for her mother and herself in Eastbourne and wrote to Dante Gabriel describing this, one of her few holidays away from London, on which she and her mother would sit for hours on the Parade and watch the crowds go by. She even had leisure to express a feminine interest in costume and the latest fashions. A very simply but beautifully dressed lady whom they saw often on the Parade showed a face that Dante Gabriel would have liked to paint. But there were horrors, newfangled horrors in this pleasant seashore resort. "Its idlers, brass bands, nigger minstrels" became tiresome and an-

noyed Mrs. Rossetti. "But I being more frivolous am in a degree amused."

4

The correspondence with Dante Gabriel was drawing to an end. His slow withdrawal from the world where he once shone with splendor had gradually increased the legend of the painter-poet. He quarreled with his old friends. So many of them, he felt, were too much at home in a world that was always receding from under his feet, that was always alien to him. "A great Italian living in England," Ruskin had called him. But his Italian flamboyance and richness of nature attracted and repelled such people as George Meredith and William Morris. He quarreled with his patrons and saw as little as possible of Swinburne.

The loneliness of the Romantic artist swept over him like a cold sea wave; his kingdom was not of this world, his age had yet to be born or had already passed away. And yet if he knew it his pictures and his fame were spreading among the young, to whom he seemed to be a creature of an immortal world of art and not an ailing man crazed by drugs and hallucinations of persecution. To those that entered the dusty magnificence of his house in Cheyne Walk he poured forth his incredible grievances. Did they know that there was a plot to prevent him from selling his pictures or indeed from painting at all? And if he was not to be allowed to continue with his painting how could he exist at all? Not on his poetry, of course, and besides the Buchanan review had sullied his good name forever. People whispered about it wherever he went. Wherever he walked, fingers pointed out from dark streets; and hushed voices heavy with hate reached him through his windows at night. An unspoken conspiracy hedged him in and prevented him from sleeping and working.

There were consolations. In the warm plump arms of Fanny

Cornforth, still handsome though vulgar and greedy, there was the peace that comes from interludes of sensuality. She was illiterate; so much the more comfortable, so much the better. His friends snubbed her. Christina and William Michael ignored her. His literary friends never tired of repeating hilarious stories of her avarice, her dropped *h*'s, her abysmal lack of culture; but he had never been a snob. His vision of life had been pure and true; and this purity, running like a silver strain through the heavy gold of his sensuality, made his art curiously spiritual in its final implications for all its sensuousness.

Although Fanny was no longer "good to paint," having become too gross, too heavy, she was still good to lie with. But the side of his nature that longed for the unattainable God still worshiped the blanched beauty of Jane Morris, who was fading away late and gracefully like a Persian lilac tree. Though her husband no longer called on his old friend and master, she visited him in his shuttered, haunted house. Dante Gabriel from his dream-drugged stupor would arise and try to talk to her; but she noticed that his conversation, still made beguiling by that beautiful voice, would ramble and fall away in incoherences. He found her friendly silence soothing.

Poor Jane Morris! Her loveliness weighed heavily upon her. She found it hard to live up to her noble proportions, her tragic beauty. Her mind was not formed upon tragic lines. There was a time when she had enjoyed simple pleasures, gossipy eighteenth century memoirs, simple talk.* But she looked like the Delphic Sibyl and had to behave at last as if she had stepped out of the sacred wood, full of the mystery of the gods. Her few attempts at being herself died down, and she at last became the creature of romance and of mystery that all wished her to be. And so young William Rothenstein saw her in her old age at

* See references to Mrs. William Morris in W. Graham Robertson's *Life Was Worth Living* (New York, 1931).

Kelmscott lying on a chaise longue, dressed in flowing draperies. Across her lap was the superb, the enormous Kelmscott Chaucer all white and gold and medieval lettering. Later Bernard Shaw received a shock at seeing her in her old age still beautiful, still a living symbol of the Pre-Raphaelite dream of beauty, death-pale, reclining on her sofa, her eyes half closed in weariness. In his last days she brought the consoling beauty of her withdrawn spirit to Dante Gabriel. She brought relief from the expiring ardors of the flesh, and one did not expect chattiness from a woman who looked like the Delphic Sibyl. Long, long ago she had learned this. It had been difficult to learn her rôle, but before the end she wore it as naturally as she wore her hidden sadness. Eight months before her death young Mrs. Watts-Dunton saw Mrs. Morris, "her beauty striking as ever," dressed in amethyst velvet, the folds of her dress flowing in medieval lines, the bodice cut rather low at the neck and outlined with beautiful old lace. A new generation was to sit at her feet and admire and wonder.

Another of the rare and welcome visitors to Cheyne Walk was Theodore Watts-Dunton whose gift for friendship with the great was exercised over Dante Gabriel with its usual rewarding consequences. That he managed to keep Rossetti's confidence and affection to the last is a tribute to his delicacy and tact; but his calm exterior, his brisk efficiency, his vast and unpedantic knowledge of poetry made him a soothing and steady friend for men as high-strung as Swinburne and Rossetti. His mannerisms, so quaint and delightful to his well disposed contemporaries, seem now to have resembled those of a too poetical, a less gifted Henry James. His poetry was in the best minor Romantic style of the period, and he thought of himself as the foe of Philistinism—something of a Bohemian, certainly a great lover of the gypsies and gypsy lore. Unfortunately, no one but his beautiful young wife, whom he married in old age, ever

thought of him as gypsy-hearted and Bohemian. To Rossetti, despondent, ill, unable to work, afraid to be left alone with his thoughts, imagining that the very thrushes in the garden were singing unutterable obscenities about him, he brought security and peace. The distress of the mother and sister increased when they visited Dante Gabriel, and Christina's sad, passionate gaze when religion was mentioned was painful to his racked nerves. He was superstitious rather than religious, and his vague sensual mysticism brought highly colored visions of supernatural things, and poetic glimpses into eternity; but he was not a true Christian in Christina's and his mother's eyes. Nor was their harsh creed suitable to his warm, relaxed, Italian nature. Any leaning toward an established church that he may have had was toward the Roman Catholic church of his fathers. So he preferred visits from Janey Morris because her cool beauty revived him, and from Watts-Dunton because he was essentially sanguine and cheerful.

5

The end came to Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the bungalow at Birchington-on-the-Sea where he had gone in a vain attempt to recover his health. Christina and her mother were at his side. In his last moments he tried to remember some of his own poetry, quoting and misquoting it. "My own verse torments me," he had said. He again left definite instructions that he was not to be buried near Elizabeth Siddal in the family vault at Highgate. Her ghost had never been exorcised, he feared her in death as he had loved and been irritated by her in life. He dared not in death lie near the violated grave:

What whisperest thou? Nay, why?
Name the dead hours? I mind them well:
Their ghosts in many darkened doorways dwell
With desolate eyes to know them by.

Dante Gabriel was buried in the churchyard at Birchington-on-the-Sea. His mother, Christina, William Michael, and a few friends were at the grave, and they left him within hearing of the uneasy murmur of the waves. It was a sound he had always found disturbing, and in his last illness it had been terrifying. Christina was uncertain as to whether he had found salvation, and when she returned to London she again expressed in prayer her hopes and fears. His death had taken much of the color and the warmth from her life. She wrote later of his grave and her prayers for him:

A lowly hope, a height that is but low,
While Time sets solemnly,
While the tide rises of Eternity,
Silent and neither swift nor slow.

In her mind's eye she was always to see that austere grave by the sea, the hill that rose from the flat countryside, "the low-voiced, creeping tide over the chalky shore matted with weeds and damp grasses." The "great Italian born in England" was in death as in life a spiritual exile forever alien to the world around him. To Fanny Cornforth, who had asked permission to come to the funeral, William Michael had written a cold, courteous letter forbidding her to come. Christina again ignored her. With the death of Dante Gabriel the spell of the Pre-Raphaelites became intangible. It is doubtful if Rossetti ever thought of himself as a Pre-Raphaelite, especially in his later years. The pictures and poems that he had created sprang out of his own nature, and by some miracle they struck a responsive chord; the times were ready for him. It is now easier to sneer at the Pre-Raphaelites than to explain their real charm. In later years Ford Madox Brown and Holman Hunt each claimed to be the true originator of the school; but it was Dante Gabriel's magical personality that had created the group and had drawn the public.

Pre-Raphaelitism will always mean Rossetti. Rossetti's charm in life was potent in death and enveloped his faults in a golden haze. Many years after, Walford Graham Robertson wrote:

I well remember my first sight of [Rossetti's] pictures. Before the glamour fell upon me, I had time to look round in amazement and to think—"But these things are surely *bad*, ill-painted, ill-drawn, hot and heavy in colour"—then my reason fled and I was led captive. . . .

Any intelligent art student could out-paint Rossetti, nearly any member of a life class could draw better, and yet what they would produce would be of no import, while his slightest scribble is full of suggestion.

Perhaps because Rossetti at his best was a partaker of the great, deep-rooted English Romantic tradition, he struck something deep in the English soul. His best poetry and prose and painting is touched by that storm-struck emotion that swept Europe when all around the spiritual atmosphere had become too dry, too brittle, too much choked with materialism, and rationalism, and scientific thinking had stultified into a formula. He was one of the small group of true Romantics who achieved what one critic has called "the unchaining of Dionysus."

6

In her draped and somber rooms in Torrington Square, Christina moved like a Mariana in the moated grange, a Mariana who no longer expected any deliverer but Death. Her ailing mother, her two sick aunts who lived with them moved like ghosts in their secluded upstairs rooms. Much of her time was spent in nursing them. Daily she received calls from her aging friend Cayley, now thinner, shabbier, shyer, more absent-minded than ever. He would cackle his dry, learned little jokes, and would read to her while she sat at her knitting or mending, two occupa-

tions in which she was conscientious and awkward. She had no real gift for domesticity, but had assumed the disagreeable task as a Christian duty. She seemed to be occupied all day in doing everything but what would have given her release and pleasure.



Elegies and Devotions: Middle Years and Fame (1884–1886)

CHRISTINA was aging, she was getting stout; and there is something touching about the feminine vanity in one of her letters to her brother: "If only my figure would shrink somehow, for a fat poetess is incongruous, especially when seated at the grave of buried hope." She could laugh at her disabilities but not overcome them. Somewhere in the outside world the Pre-Raphaelite legend was to take on a new mythology, though the tamed Swinburne locked fast in Watts-Dunton's suburban villa was becoming a feeble poet and a ferocious not to say violently pedantic critic of other people's poetry. But Burne-Jones, gentle, elegant, delicately charming, was to obtain social success and honor through the prestige of the Pre-Raphaelite name. His elongated and sexless youths and maidens with their dead drugged eyes breathing a glazed innocence, brought an air of virtue and purity to a movement that still seemed too advanced and exotic to the public. William Morris was deep in radicalism and the handicrafts now, and strange people like Whistler and Oscar Wilde were beginning to be talked about as true successors to the Pre-Raphaelites—a comparison that was unfair to Whistler, who never tired of reminding people that both Rossetti and Swinburne had always disapproved of Wilde. When the Pre-Raphaelite movement lost impetus and its contribution was measured its chief influence

sometimes seemed, as has been said before, to have been on book illustration and interior decoration.*

A vigorous campaign had been started (though William Morris, not Rossetti, was responsible) against heavy floral carpets, against heavy velvet curtains or hangings, against gilded or brick-red wallpaper, against heavy bedsteads with enormous headboards, against draped dark heavy furniture, against walls that seemed to plead for air, so stifled were they with pictures and photographs. The plea for hardwood floors, small rugs, plain chairs and tables reached the minority at least who prided themselves on an advanced aesthetic taste. But that taste extended to medieval tapestry hangings, Venetian glass, blue China, and Japanese prints. It was almost a revolution in living, and certainly unlike Balmoral or Osborne or any of the palaces most loved by Queen Victoria.

At Christina's home on Torrington Square the atmosphere and furnishings were the same; and as the styles for women changed she showed no sign of changing with them. Her very lack of style gave her greater distinction now. Edmund Gosse, who first met her in the early seventies, wished that she had taken better advantage of her striking appearance and dressed more glamorously. He forgot what Mrs. William Morris had proved, that beauty itself is an art and requires a lifetime of difficult perfecting. He could not reconcile the poetry he admired with the woman who stood before him. He noticed the dark hair streaked across the forehead and turned up in a chignon at the back of the neck, the dark stiff dress with a plain white collar, the extraordinary skirt sunk over a crinoline, now that crinolines were going out of fashion. Her manner, he found pretentious to solemnity; her ignorance of ordinary events in the world, incredibly abysmal. She had no small talk; but she had

* Ruskin, who first supported the Pre-Raphaelites, ended his days praising the works of Kate Greenaway with equal enthusiasm and denouncing Whistler.

perceptions, and it could not have taken her long to have read through Gosse's worldliness and innate shallowness. He was not her type, his wit and gossip did not amuse her, though she was grateful to him for his literary courtesies. Later he was moved to admiration in spite of himself, and as he got to know her better he wrote: "I have seen her sitting alone, in the midst of a noisy drawing room, like a pillar of cloud, a Sibyl whom no one had the audacity to approach." But he noticed that toward those who were able to touch upon her favorite subjects her heart opened like an unsealed fountain. "The heavy lids of her weary-looking, Italian eyes would lift and display her ardour as she talked of the mysteries of poetry and religion." Even then in the midst of her religious reveries she was writing poems of rich classical beauty, poems that Petrarch would have loved and understood, poems like "Venus's Looking-Glass" or the musical and fine-textured "Confluents," which had the delicate limpidity of her early work but also an undertone of something that was darker and stronger.

2

Another death was to strike home, that of Charles Bagot Cayley. Christina's friendship with him had grown into something rare and deep; now that they were both aging, it appeared more touching than ever, a kind of tenuous trembling marriage of two spirits. Toward him she became tender, humorous, a little teasing, very maternal; and his gentle, humble dependence on her amused all their friends. Early in 1883 he had written to her hinting that he would not live long—a chronic heart disease had been discovered; and he offered to make Christina his literary executor. Troubled, she answered in a brief playful, maternal letter assuring him that he had many more years to live, offering to be his executor if necessary, but hoping that the day for this necessity was far, far off. To William Michael

she wrote at this time that if she had had more than £2,000 to bequeath she would have liked to leave a substantial sum to Cayley. Something of guilt and remorse entered into her relationship with Cayley. To his brother she once admitted that she had felt conscience-stricken at the thought that she had led him to expect marriage with her, and then refused him. Was it because of her that he had wandered around London, his clothes ill kept, always a little lost, lonely, aloof, estranged from the world, like a delicate child deprived of his mother? Would things have been better if she had married him? When he wrote to her that he was leaving her his little all in his will she answered: "If you think any member of your family could feel hurt—do not do it—very likely there was a moment—and no wonder—those who loved you best thought very severely of me, and I deserved severity at my own hands." He also wrote that in the event of his death she was to have his best writing desk as well as his manuscripts, and he returned her letters to her.

Early in December, 1883, Professor and Mrs. Cayley visited Torrington Square. Christina had gone to church to attend the litany, and her mother received the news first. Charles Bagot Cayley had been found dead in his bed; he had evidently died in his sleep. There had been no warning. The day before, he had called on William Michael at Somerset House to ask for one of Galileo's dialogues; and a week before, at Torrington Square, he had taken the fourth hand in a game of whist with the family.

William Michael was never to forget Christina's face, voice, and manner at Somerset House as she told him of her loss. She had gone to Cayley's lodgings at once and seen "her dear friend lying just as he was found in the attitude of sleep, a hand raised to his face." She bought a beautiful wreath of flowers at Covent Garden and herself placed it on the sheet where other flowers

were lying. In a letter to Mrs. Frederic Shields she opened her heart:

Our Xmas has indeed been saddened by the loss of so dear a friend. "They shall perish but Thou remainest"—one ought to be able to say so even when death does its momentary work—but how easy the words are to utter, and how difficult the meaning to attain.

There was not only her sorrow now, but that tormenting pain of remorse, of doubt, the feeling of having (perhaps) failed one she loved. Something of the conflict may be seen in the October 10 entry in *Time Flies*, the book that reveals so much of her thoughts. The verses that appear under that entry were published two years after Cayley's death, and are a silent dialogue between her human love and her stern and implacable God. Tenderness, self-righteousness, and self-reproach are in these verses:

All heaven is blazing yet,
With the meridian sun:
Make haste, unshadowing sun, make haste to set;
O lifeless life, have done.

I choose what once I chose;
What once I willed, I will:
Only the heart its own bereavement knows;
O clamorous heart, lie still.

On October 11 we find another entry. It is as if she had brooded over what she had written before and had decided that she had blamed herself too much. No, she was right; after all God himself had kept them apart in life, and in his mercy might reunite them after death. But her choice had been right after all:

That which I chose, I choose;
That which I willed, I will;
That which I once refused, I still refuse:

O hope deferred, be still.
That which I chose and choose
 And will is Jesus' Will:
He hath not lost his life who seems to lose:
 O hope deferred, hope still.

3

"Pray without ceasing." The old cry of anguish and bereavement now came to Christina's lips, and she was more often found in prayer in her own room, or at the near-by church where she spent so much of her time. Her days too now were spent in even more of her quiet, unrecorded charities and in the writing of her remarkable devotional works which had gained her a public that had never heard of the Pre-Raphaelites. A side of her that never appeared in her conversation and seldom in her poetry appeared in that strange tortuous, decidedly un-Victorian devotional prose, in its intricate involved style and glowing symbolism. This is also the period of some of her best devotional poems, so little liked by those who had loved the warm innocent sensuousness of "Goblin Market" or "When I am dead, my dearest" or "A Birthday." Yet, as has been seen, the Lord of her vision did not look down on her with gentleness, charity, and compassion. He was a stern God who demanded more and more perfection, and perfection alone was required from her. Those who caught a glimpse of her now could not reconcile the dark, passion-worn face with its quick wild glance, this woman always dressed in black with perhaps a quaint old-fashioned bow of mauve at her neck (fastening a white frill), to the woman who had had the vision of sin and passion in "The Convent Threshold," who had seen the young men and women,

Milk-white, wine-flushed among the wines
Up and down leaping, to and fro.

But her devotional poetry sometimes caught that wild note of potential passion. She had flung herself on God and received his many rebuffs and silences with patient hope. She waited for that rare moment of rapture when God would speak, would relent for a silent small moment and approve, when he would forgive all and offer more than she had asked.

Rare as these moments were, they compensated for everything, they were worth many months, many years of suffering:

Not in this world of hope deferred,
This world of perishable stuff:—
Eye hath not seen nor ear hath heard
Nor heart conceived that full “enough”:—
Here moans the separating sea,
Here harvests fail, here breaks the heart:
There God shall join and no man part,
I full of Christ and Christ of me.

In her intensity she slips and falls (tonally and verbally) at times, and the woman who in “Goblin Market,” as Edith Sitwell says, wrote “the most perfect poem in English written by a woman” becomes a little careless in her diction. Such clumsy phrasing as “perishable stuff” comes in only too often now, as if she were determined to forget her natural fastidiousness, as if she were denying some of her artistic skill in the service of God. But the passion is the passion of true devotion, and only when human beings forget to search after God with unbearable hopes and unutterable desire may we dismiss Christina Rossetti’s devotional poems. Her gifts add fire and beauty to her sincerity. The world was indeed darkening around her, and she clung closer to God. This was natural enough—the true artist is a lonely spirit. The fear of losing her mother made her heart freeze, for Francesca Rossetti was growing weaker and weaker as her spirit, so powerful in its gentle domination, became stronger.

Sometimes it seemed as if Christina grew younger and younger in the presence of her mother's strength, a helpless little girl absolutely dependent on her mother's support and judgment. Visitors were amused, hearing the daughter defer to her in all literary and critical opinions. "My mother thinks that" or "My mother says" was a common preliminary to a conversation. The Italian warmth that had filled Christina's poems with ripe fruit, with imagery of roses and lilies and fragrant violets, now poured itself out in a limitless longing for God, for his protection, for —she hardly knew what.

O Lord, seek us, O Lord, find us
In Thy patient care;
Be Thy Love before, behind us,
Round us, everywhere:
Lest the god of this world blind us,
Lest he speak us fair,
Lest he forge a chain to bind us,
Lest he bait a snare.

On looking over the past, how little there seemed to be of pleasure and ease and light! The love affair with Collinson recalled little but sadness—perhaps it contained a faint taint of sin. Now again the memory of Cayley brought suffering, sadness, regret. What could she have done to make him happy? There was the memory of the brief Italian journey when a certain point at the ascent of St. Gotthard had blossomed into an actual garden of forget-me-nots. "Unforgotten and never to be forgotten that lovely efflorescence which made earth as cerulean as the sky," she had written. When she wished to recall the scene she found that in her memory St. Gotthard remained "invested not with flowers but with perpetual snow: not with life but with lifelessness." The sun of noonday, always obscurely sleeping but always alive in her soul, was chilling within her. Where

was that summer day on Lake Como "when June itself glowed like a double June"? To face again the old visions of beauty and wonder seemed sensual and pagan. It was best to turn to God who received all beauty, all longing and wonder, and transmuted them into unmistakable channels:

Lord God of Hosts, most Holy and most High,
What made Thee tell Thy Name of Love to me?
What made Thee live our life? what made Thee die?
"My love of thee."

I pitched so low, Thou so exceeding high,
What was it made Thee stoop to look at me
When flawless sons of God stood wondering by?
"My love of thee."

Her very aloofness from the literary scene was beginning to arouse interest in her personality and her work. Some of the glamour that Dante Gabriel had shed in life and death cast its aura around her too now, and though she appeared unaware her reputation was beginning to send down permanent roots. The few friends who penetrated the darkened threshold of the house in Torrington Square seemed to realize their privilege and often wrote down their impressions for posterity. Among the few but very welcome visitors was Barbara Leigh-Smith Bodichon. When young she had been a friend of Dante Gabriel, who described her as having "plenty of fair hair, fat, and tin, and readiness to climb a mountain in breeches or to ford a river without them." In later years she was remembered as portly, dignified, and untidy, one of the founders of Girton College, a pioneer in the work of obtaining higher education for women. Her politics were liberal, her ideas on art and literature radical, and she was everything that Christina did not quite approve; and yet Christina with her delicate instinct felt something rare

and good in her. Dr. K. F. Littledale, a very cultivated, a very high-church divine who is described as "learned in exegesis and liturgical literature" and who is said to have heard more confessions than Dr. Pusey, was a frequent caller now. He seemed to be always in bad health but Christina found him like Cayley, full of whimsy and learned puns. He was an excellent critic of her work and was quick to detect and correct a flaw in orthodoxy. He sent her amusing little notes, he fortified her faith, in the dreadful moments when she felt herself slipping, when she felt that God had deserted her, and the prospect of eternal damnation opened its black vista before her.

Then there was always Frederic Shields. He had been Dante Gabriel's friend and worshiper, he was to be Christina's friend in life and beyond life, and his pictures—which to our eyes are, when not merely pretty, a curious blend between Bouguereau and Blake—seemed sublime to her. With Dr. Littledale and Frederic Shields she could unbend, she could be a saint but a playful one: they were men after her heart, with the unworldly purity of Cayley and Collinson. Through Dr. Littledale she was introduced to Mackenzie Bell, a young man who shared her religious convictions and wrote scholarly fragile verses, curiously feminine. He was to be her first biographer.

4

Early in the 1880's William Sharp, a rising young poet and critic, visited Christina and her mother; and he has left a vivid portrait of Christina. He found her reading to her mother and was struck by the lovely tones of her voice, which always seemed to be her greatest charm. She was reading Southwell's "The Burning Babe," and Mrs. Rossetti was so delighted with the poem that she wanted Christina to read it again so that Mr. Sharp would hear it. He noticed the picturesque but gloomy drawing room, the white Shetland shawl that old Mrs. Rossetti wore

across her shoulders, the lamplight on her white hair, her clear-cut ivory features, the straight back that age had not stooped. Christina with her head resting on her right hand and her left hand turning the pages of the book added to the interest of the picture. He noticed how beautiful her enunciation was, "each word pronounced as completely and separately as notes of music struck on the piano." Later he noticed the Quakerlike simplicity of her dress and the extreme and almost demure simplicity of the material. A serene and severe passivity struck him as her dominant expression. She was so pale as to suggest anemia; but when she spoke an alert, an almost wild look entered her large expressive, azure-gray eyes, eyes of a color which often deepened to the darkest velvety gray. He also noticed that the contours of her face were still smooth and young. Her hair, once a rich brown, now looked dark, "thickly threaded with solitary white hairs." His first impression was that she was of medium height, but he saw afterwards that she was really a small woman. Through her quietude he felt her intense and painful shyness, "as though there was a certain perturbation from this meeting with a stranger though one so young and unknown."

Meeting strangers was indeed difficult. It was pleasanter to receive compliments through the mail, though sometimes she and her mother would give tea parties where such distinguished acquaintances as Robert Browning were invited to meet her favorite clergymen or some of the devout young poets (many of them then as now unknown to fame) who called on her or wrote to her. What Browning thought of her poetry we do not know; but he was uneasy about Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry and had at least given passive moral support to Robert Buchanan's attack. Dante Gabriel, made sensitive by his persecution mania, had suspected this; but Christina had no knowledge of it. For Browning, any who breathed the slightest doubt

of the superlative merits of his wife's poetry or on her perfection of character became lifelong foes; no invective was strong enough to blast them. Lately, impertinent critics had been saying that Christina Rossetti was a greater literary artist than his angelic Elizabeth. Christina had stepped in by answering modestly, "I doubt whether the woman is born for many a long day who will balance, not to say outweigh, Mrs. Browning." And so she retained Robert Browning as an acquaintance if not a friend.

A powerful and very vocal friend was (as always) Algernon Charles Swinburne. Though Christina rarely saw him now, he overwhelmed with praise each volume of her verse as it came out. He dedicated his roundels to her, he read her devotional tracts with the fine courtesy he showed to everyone but a literary antagonist. He read every line (so he claimed) of her study of the Apocalypse, *The Face of the Deep*. "And I still live," he confided to a friend after the experience. Christina was grateful. She could not admire the pagan elements in his poems, but she could and did admire his latest poems about babies (something that no one has done since)—the baby poems that had made even the saintly Gerard Manley Hopkins admit to a friend that they made him sympathize with Herod, the destroyer of the innocents. She had her lapses in that faith, however, when she read Swinburne's poem to the twin children of William and Lucy Rossetti. "What a prostrate poem does Mr. Swinburne address to the twins," she wrote. After some particularly high praise for her poems from him, she sent him one of her devotional works, *Called to Be Saints*. Perhaps she hoped to convert him. He acknowledged it with sweeping politeness, and with special appreciation of the verses on St. Barnabas, the holy innocents, St. Philip, and St. James. In writing of her he forgot his usual queer prose, thus beautifully described by Harold Nicolson:

His violent rodomontades, each word flanked by double alliterative adjectives, his incessant superlatives, his unending sentences rising in a reiterative crescendo, his false analogies and incoherent similes, jumbled together in a fervid rush of encumbered verbiage.

The violent criticism which usually caused more confusion than distress to its victims was certainly not extended to Christina Rossetti. For her he was not the eagle but the courteous gentle dove. But then the man who had written of "that supreme evil, God" could not arouse anything in Christina's heart but a patient Christian tolerance. One is sure that she said some of her prayers for him, and that the slips of paper pasted over the objectionable passages in his books always remained.

5

Early in 1883 Michael, the infant son of William Michael and Lucy, died. Christina, as her books for and about children show, had no great feeling for them. When she wished to unbend with them she became as playful and charming as a kindly but absent-minded governess. It was as if with a great effort of will she had entered courteously and wearily into the tiresome world of their childhood. But little Michael *was* dear to her. She had persuaded his unbelieving parents to allow her to baptize him, and we wonder what dark mystical meanings she may have read into his early death. This death led to a poem that is one of Christina's loveliest, if not as one admirer of Christina says worthy of a place beside Milton's "On the Death of a Fair Infant." It is indeed among the fine threnodies in the language:

Brief dawn and noon and setting time!
Our rapid-rounding moon has fled;
A black eclipse before the prime
Has swallowed up that shining head.
Eternity holds up her looking-glass:—

The eclipse of Time will pass,
And all that lovely light return to sight.

Eternity was indeed beginning to hold up her looking glass and to reflect ever darkening images. First Gabriel and then Cayley and now little Michael, the "holy innocent" sent on before as a preparation for the deepest pang of all.

On the 8th of April, 1886, Francesca Lavinia Rossetti died; and from this loss Christina never recovered. She had hoped against hope for her mother's life, long after hope had departed from everyone else. It is as if she were warding off an endless night that had come into her room. She had been primarily the poet of death, the poet of the death-wish. How often she had sung of death, of Death crowned with roses, Death eternally young and beautiful crowned with myrtle, or lying nude and beautiful beneath the mournful cypress trees. But this one death took almost her last breath and creative vitality. Francesca Rossetti had been a fortress of defense to her husband and children, simple, dignified, steady, the gentle commander who inspired and held them all.

The house was empty indeed now, the great clock on the stairway sounded out the empty hours on the slate-gray air. To a friend Christina wrote after her mother's funeral, "I Christina Rossetti, happy and unhappy daughter of so dear a saint, write the last words. . . . My beautiful mother looked beautiful after death, so contented as almost to have an air of pleasure."

A favorite clergyman called, a neighbor came in to take a last look. Her old domestic, who bore the delightful name of Sarah Catchpole, went in to look at Francesca Rossetti too for the last time. Upstairs the two maiden aunts sat sunk in invalidism, grief, and old age. It was to their sister Francesca that all the exciting things of life had happened. How natural that death should strike her first and leave them useless, help-

less, waiting, waiting for Death's final favor! Their grief touched Christina's heart, their dependence on her gave a continuing purpose to her life, some purpose to the final loud striking hours:

Heaven's chimes are slow, but sure to strike at last:
Earth's sands are slow, but surely dropping thro':
And much we have to suffer, much to do,
Before the time be past.

Chimes that keep time are neither slow nor fast:
Not many are the numbered sands nor few:
A time to suffer, and a time to do,
And then the time is past.



Eternity Holds Up Her Looking Glass: Images Between Life and Death

"OF what use is it to love God if we are forbidding to our neighbors?" Christina was aware that a new generation had arrived on the scene, to whom the search for the religious certainty that had haunted the middle years of the century was unfamiliar. The ardors of the movement that had produced a Keble, a Pusey, a Newman, even such Anglican poets as Richard Watson Dixon (whose life if not his poetry held completed beauty and illumination) had dwindled, had gone into other channels. The Catholic converts among the poets, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Francis Thompson, Alice Meynell, and Lionel Johnson, were the indirect inheritors of that great wave of religious fervor and church reform, the Oxford Movement. Then the conversion of Cardinal Newman had taught the Anglican Church that, amidst such extremes, it could no longer remain the church of the *Via Media*, Protestant in doctrine, Catholic in spirit. A reaction against this extreme set in, the Church sprang to arms. But Christina, like many other sensitive and religious natures of her day, was made narrow by a brooding sense of the evils of the century to come. The Church (so it seemed) had known and escaped great dangers, it had almost been destroyed by the medieval glamour and passion of that ex-Anglican clergyman Cardinal Manning, by the winning and powerful sweetness of Cardinal Newman. Memories of old Gabriele Rossetti and his

mingled attraction and rebellion against the Catholic Church reached her hidden consciousness, worked secretly in her blood. With a fervor and passion that seems purely Latin she testified to her allegiance to the Protestant Anglican Church.

The Oxford Movement had at least one achievement that Wesley and Whitefield had attempted with incomplete success a century before: it had infused a new vigor and enthusiasm into the slumbering body of the Church of England. Now the church had become aware of its history, its ritual, its doctrine as it had never been before. It would be aware of its aims as it had not been since the days of Ridley and Cranmer, since the martyrdom of that faulty but devoted and cultivated son of the church, Archbishop Laud. "One step, one small step more and you are in Rome," was the remark addressed to a zealous high-church clergyman; but it was just this delicate, precarious balance that made the difference, the essential difference between high-church Anglicanism and Catholicism. When a great nobleman like the Marquis of Bute announced his conversion to Catholicism all Protestant Victorian England stood aghast, and Disraeli took up his pen to satirize, and Gladstone to deplore. When the Duke of Norfolk, the premier peer of England, put the traditional Catholicism of his family and his great name behind so many Catholic conversions, Queen Victoria viewed all this with alarm. The Anglican Church against "the encircling gloom" took to its spiritual weapons (and they were many) to guide the spirit and charm the mind. And among its strongest weapons was its great tradition in English letters that combines richness of language with vigorous austerity of thought, Protestant skepticism and liberalism with a beauty of liturgy and ritual that seems peculiarly suited to the genius of its people.

Christina had discovered, like many Anglicans before her, that the Oxford Movement was more than a religious revival: it was a necessary rediscovery and development of the institu-

tional aspects of religion expressed in the church. As Geoffrey Faber has said in a brilliant book,* the Tractarian leaders were never tired of emphasizing: "Men deceive themselves if they seek God otherwise than through the Church." For the Church "was the continuing dwelling-place of God's spirit upon earth, and as such she was owed all the honour and glory within the power of men to pay." Christina would have agreed with all her heart. The belief made her harsh to herself with the passionate rigor of some *religieuse* from among her Catholic ancestors. Certainly there were moments when she seemed to go off on an un-English, though outwardly quiet, extreme. "Of what use is it to love God if we are forbidding to our neighbors?" Christina would not have understood this, though her extreme rigidity in matters of religion frightened away many friends. But how could this matter to one who was so safely anchored in the Kingdom of the living God? Obedience to His church was obedience to His will. Somewhere she had asked, "But who ever honestly said, 'I cannot obey'?"

The joyful faith that had lit up the deathbed of her sister Maria was, however, not to be hers. There were moments when she was shadowed by a sense of doom more dreadful than that which had obsessed the God-haunted poet Cowper a century before, moments when a sense of unbearable, indefinable guilt bore down upon her. All had been waste, all was vanity. What was it that she ought to have done that she had left undone?

Passing away, saith the World, passing away:
Chances, beauty, and youth, sapped day by day:
Thy life never continueth in one stay.
Is the eye waxen dim, is the dark hair changing to grey
That hath won neither laurel nor bay?

But she had won her laurels, and sometimes her fame reached her through unsuspected channels. There, for instance, was her

* *Oxford Apostles: A Character Study of the Oxford Movement*, pp. 342-343.

prose, which gained her the audience that had never heard of Dante Gabriel or the Pre-Raphaelites. Two of her most discriminating critics, Dorothy Stuart and Fredegond Shove, have taken the time to examine her prose; and, being poets they are delighted with what they see. Not all the devotional tracts written mainly for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge are worth preserving; but in one, *The Face of the Deep*, a study of the Apocalypse, Christina wrote a great devotional work. It is the Victorian age's contribution to the Church of England as Newman's *Apologia* is that age's contribution to the Church of Rome; and in its magnificent imagery, its baroque prose, it ranks among the classics of its kind. Not that her prose is always inspired. Elisabeth Luther Cary is almost right when in her study of the Rossettis she notes that Christina's prose "pitilessly betrays every defect of her style and every limitation of her mind"; but the comment is not based on too careful an examination of the devotional prose. Of Christina Rossetti's stories for children and her attempts at fiction the less said the better—they are not bad, they are just unbearably dull and, with time, have become unreadable. But the same thing will be said of many popular novels that now fall off the press to receive the customary laudations and conspicuous space in the popular reviews. *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*, which appeared in 1885, is one of the most revealing of her devotional works. Its passages of prose are alternated with verse (some of her best—and worst—religious verse first appeared in these devout meditations) written without hope or desire for critical esteem or fame. Interspersed among her meditations about the saints and martyrs are naïve but delightful bits of personal philosophy, private revelation, shy autobiographical notes. There is in her best prose a touch of Caroline magnificence, and we agree with Dorothy Stuart that she sometimes "builds up her sentences with cumulative deliberation, almost after the manner of Hooker or Donne."

Something that died out of her later poetry appears over and over again in her devotional prose—the glowing imagery of fruit, flowers, and jewels. *Called to Be Saints* (1881) has this jewel passage (each saint has a flower or jewel attributed to him) on the beryl:

Beryl, then, as we behold it, is so fraught with beauties and shades of beauties that even according to its visible semblance words paint it not adequately. While I say it is in colour green, I read also that it may be blue, or rosy, or honey yellow, or pale violet, or colourless. I have seen one dusky Beryl exhibiting a star: a second, adorned by a vivid prismatic spot. Transparency it possesses, but in varying degrees: sometimes it is opaque, or at least tends towards opacity. One specimen will appear clouded, another display markings, a third will be clear as water; and like water this gem is said to possess a reflective quality.

In the same volume we have her quaint tribute to the Virgin Mary:

Meanwhile let her be to us as violets not pried after, but sweetly and surely proclaimed by the fragrance of their odour, as a leaf is hidden or a leaf-hidden dove revealed by the melody of its cooings, as a moon not yet mounted above our horizons, yet foreshown by the outskirts of her proper halo.

The temptation to quote copiously from Christina Rossetti's devotional prose is great, for these books, now so rare as to be almost unobtainable, may still gather dust on some forgotten bookshelf. Here is a description of a cobweb from *Time Flies*:

It exhibits beauty, ingenuity, intricacy. Imagine it in the early morning jewelled with dewdrops, and each of these at sunny moments a spark of light or a section of rainbow. Woven, too, as no man could weave it, fine and flexible, frail and tenacious.

This may almost be taken as a description of her own poetry at its best; but in much of her prose description of natural phenomena, of flowers, of lovely objects, she has a gift that was rare, that is almost missing in the better poets of the Victorian age—the gift of precision, of accurate and careful observation. Only the early Tennyson in his loving observation of nature approached her there.

Her great devotional work *The Face of the Deep* is almost worthy of a place beside Donne and Hooker or Lancelot Andrewes. Here is a passage from it that, if not the most beautiful, is among the most revealing:

“Understandest thou what thou readest?” asked Philip the Deacon of the Ethiopian eunuch. And he said, “How can I, except some man should guide me?” Whereupon flowed forth to him the stream of light, knowledge, and love. Yet not then did his illumination commence: it already was his in a measure to enjoy, respond to, improve, even before his father in God preached Christ unto him. What could he do before that moment? He could study and pray, he could cherish hope, exercise love, feel after Him Whom as yet he could not intelligently find.

Even more illuminating is another passage:

Concerning Himself God Almighty proclaimed of old: “I AM THAT I AM,” and man’s inherent feeling of personality seems in some sort to attest and correspond to this revelation: I who am myself cannot but be myself. I am what God has constituted me: so that however I may have modified myself, yet I do remain that same I; it is I who live, it is I who must die, it is I who must rise again at the last day. I rising again out of my grave must carry on that very life which was mine before I died, and of which death itself could not altogether snap the thread. Who I was I am, who I am I am, who I am I must be for ever and ever.

In *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedicite*, we find her most delicate little studies of nature,

sharp vignettes that would have delighted Gerard Manley Hopkins. Here we find one called "Waters Above the Firmament":

Remote from either extreme stretches the prevalent blue, pure and absolute: thus the sky and its azure become so at one in our associations, that all fair blue objects within our reach, stone or flower, sapphire or harebell, act as terrene mirrors, conveying to us an image of that which is above themselves as "earthly pictures with heavenly meanings."

Another appears under "Winds":

Precious and beneficent is wind in the material world. It stirs up, purifies, winnows, casts aside: it is antagonistic to stagnation, to corruption: it brings heat, and likewise cold; it carries clouds, and dries up humidity. Invisible, intangible, audible, sensible, it has a breath so gentle as scarcely to bend a flower, and a blast stronger than the strength of the sea.

In a note called "Mountains and Hills" she writes:

Such streams descend with murmur, tumult and thunder, in crystal expanses, in ripples, leaps and eddies, in darkness and light, in clearness and whiteness, in foam and foam-bow.

And one is tempted to quote this note called "Nights and Days":

He dwelt as we dwell in this actual familiar world of fluctuations, on this sphere of alternate light and darkness, amid the recurrence of our seasons, the ebb and flow of our tides, the commotion of our winds; a rising and setting sun, a waxing and waning moon, ruled over His days and nights as over ours.

It is difficult to explain Christina Rossetti's true quality of mind and soul, or to sum up her complete achievement without some knowledge of her devotional prose. That the dust has been allowed to gather on it so long is a sad reflection on that

church of which she is an ornament. The same need not be said of her secular prose: the short stories, the romances, the moral tales. We suspect that many of them may have been written for money—she seems to have departed from the true center of her gifts when composing most of them. If they were as difficult to write as they are to read, we must feel sad—sad that they brought in so little money. For despite the favorable reception of her books she earned the traditional poet's fee, which means almost nothing in worldly coin. Until 1890, it is estimated, her income from her books averaged £35 to £45 a year. The death of her mother, of Dante Gabriel, of one of her aunts assured her of a modest income before her death. She was at last free from the terrors of insecurity, and she made plans to recompense William Michael for his long struggle to keep them all alive in the critical years.

In dismissing most of her works of fiction we must say a word for *Speaking Likenesses*, which has a quaint unchildish charm. Happy is the possessor of this rare volume first published in 1874. It was published in the golden age of children's illustrated books and is indeed delightful to hold in one's hand, beautifully bound and printed. The illustrations show a Kate Greenawayish little girl, innocent and authoritative, lost among shadowy gnomes and fantastic goblins, or ringing the knocker of a small cottage shaded by lovely and sinister-looking trees, or little girls in white dresses, their fair hair crowned with flowers adding a light grace to a haunted Pre-Raphaelite landscape. And the prose is at times as lovely as the illustrations. Here is a description of a landscape:

And when the forest shades were left behind her she went tripping along through pale clear moonlight; in one moment the sky before her flashed with glittering gold, and flashed from horizon to zenith with a rosy glow, for the Northern lights came out, and lit up each cloud as if it held lightning, and each hill as if it smouldered ready

to burst into a volcano. Each oaktree seemed turned to coral, and the road itself to a pavement of cornelian.

But in spite of many poetic passages, the book is interesting only as showing Christina's appalling governesslike attitude to children and her ignorance of them:

"What, Maudel pouting over that nice clean white stocking because it wants a darn? Put away your pout, and pull out your needle, my dear, for pouts make a sad beginning to my story."

Then begins the story of the little girl, the gnomes, the goblins. Was there ever a generation of children who read such books? But even reading impatiently we can find passages that have true imagination and real poetic beauty. The secret of Christina Rossetti's style is that it is a style innocently unaware of its own beauty, and we occasionally find such beauties even in her dullest prose works.

CHAPTER TWELVE



The Skull on the Table: The Later Years (1886–1890)

IT has been common for twentieth century critics of Christina Rossetti to wish that she had continued to live among the roses and lilies and violets and April raptures that make so many of her early poems delightful. They do not wish her devotional poems unwritten, they simply have not read them. But time brought change and suffering to her as it does to all too sensitive natures, and a religion of self-abnegation, of hard-won humility, subdued that early spontaneity and charm. One can now credit her with some of the finest devotional poems in the English language, poems of love transmuted into religious ecstasy, poems that have never been sufficiently admired in our century, for they were devotional and not metaphysical. Her heart lay with George Herbert in his profound simplicity and orthodoxy, rather than with the tortured, involved Donne or even the baroque, magnificent Crashaw, some of whose color and direct passion she occasionally captured. Even so brilliant a critic as Edith Sitwell, whose feeling for her is favorable and warm, has little admiration for her devotional verse, or rather admits to a temperamental distaste for it.

It is unorthodoxy that the twentieth century has admired in the devotional verse of the seventeenth, an original, rebellious approach even to God, an eternal struggle and argument with Him that is essentially Protestant and is certainly modern, and

too skeptical to be truly religious. In our immediate past, where every sexual aberration, every vice was tolerated as a matter of course, but where an admission of religious convictions brought down a torrent of ridicule and abuse and a loss of critical prestige, poets read Donne, Traherne, Herbert, Vaughan, and even Gerard Manley Hopkins without any sympathy for their genuine religious emotion. To have read such poems and admired such poets for their technique and diction and not at all for their content was a feat; but it was done, as so much of the criticism of the period testifies.

Christina had already seen the waning of the age of faith. And few can completely ignore the climate of their age, especially when it casts a pall over their dearest hopes, their fairest ideals and aspirations. A gray oppression settled over her verse. Her religious depression, probably due to her ill health and her isolation, made it seem to her clever young nephews and nieces as if she had placed a skull on her table, a skull radiating melancholy and uneasiness on the natural world around her.

Passive suffering, as Yeats remarks, is not a theme for poetry; but it has been the lot of the majority of women, and never has this fierce patience and gentle faith, this deep resignation, been expressed in so quiet and authoritative a voice. Beside Christina's faith that of George Herbert seems cheerful and vigorous; but her admirers will admit that in their different ways they both excel. Devotional poetry requires a definite and fixed religious point of view and an established Church; and Christina's devotion to the Anglican Church left no room for doubt. Tradition has often been confused with convention, and in the worst sense traditional poetry is poetry that has become conventional through misuse of a great tradition. Christina Rossetti was a traditional poet in the best sense of the word.

Unlike Emily Dickinson, her American contemporary, Christina Rossetti was brought up in an atmosphere of high creative

enthusiasm and poetic tradition and activity. She was no innovator; it was her fate to revive and purify and make fresh again an old tradition in poetry. Her gifts swept away servile conventions and standards, and in her religious poems too we hear an individual voice, a woman's voice filled with suffering and unconquered faith. We need only compare her religious verse with the persistent note of unconvincing religiosity in most of the women poets who preceded her—Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Browning, or the equally feeble but deeply, devout Adelaide Procter—in order to see the difference. Beside her even her truly religious younger contemporary, Alice Meynell, seems too literary, too mannered, almost affected. The passive feminine element in Christina Rossetti's verse becomes significant and moving, she has spoken for the unspeaking:

She stands there patient nerved with inner might,
 Indomitable in her feebleness,
Her face and will athirst against the light.

This unexpected surge of powerful pathos is seen over and over again in many of her lesser devotional poems:

Lord, I am here.—But, child, I look for thee
 Elsewhere and nearer Me.—
Lord, that way moans a wide insatiate sea:
 How can I come to Thee?—
Set foot upon the water, test and see
 If thou canst come to Me.—
Couldst Thou not send a boat to carry me,
 Or dolphin swimming free?—
Nay, boat nor fish if thy will faileth thee:
 For My Will too is free.—
O Lord, I am afraid.—Take hold on Me:
 I am stronger than the sea.—

Save, Lord, I perish.—I have hold of thee,
I made and rule the sea,
I bring thee to the haven where thou wouldest be.

2

There is no better guide to Christina Rossetti's inner life than her devotional work in prose. There she speaks as if to herself revealing things unrevealed in her poetry or private letters. But the outside world contained people whom she loved, people like her brother William Michael, his wife and children who did not share her passionate revelations into the Divine Mystery. She was no eccentric like Emily Dickinson who through self-imprisonment gained an inner liberty to say what she pleased —she was a Victorian, a gentlewoman, a classical Italian in her love of form and the good manners that are an exquisite expression of that love. She would not argue, she would not reproach; she attempted no conversion—her scruples, fastidious as they were, did not allow her to intrude on the spiritual privacies of others. But those who did not share her beliefs became conscious of the great conflict within her and a harsh rigor that did not seem to be a part of her nature, that caught them unawares. She could not speak to them freely, dear as they were, and she was anxious to return to the cultivated high-church clergymen who now came so often to see her, and to her devotions in her favorite Christ Church in the parish of St. Pancras, where she could lose herself in passionate and concentrated devotion. Her opinions became surer, her faith more fixed, and yet they did not make for greater peace and happiness. Memories of her father dying ambiguously as a Roman Catholic, of William Michael's and Lucy's obstinate refusal to shake off their agnosticism, may have troubled her, memories of Cayley, of that dear brother now dead. How had that brother died, but in

a state of superstition and confusion? In his words how elegiac, how troubled memory had become!

Then by her summoning art
Shall memory conjure back the sere
Autumnal Springs, from many a dying year.

Her faith did not teach her calmness, did not satisfy that life-long want of security; but it brought passion, it increased intensity, it kept her poetic gifts alive. Of individual immortality, she had no doubt at all. She had said that there was sufficient evidence to prove it in a court of law. It was so simple, so clear; and yet there were so many who doubted. It is this that led to the attitude that it was well to save oneself and so perhaps set an example to others. There had been a time when she brooded much over the salvation of others, without results. Had Dante Gabriel been influenced by her, had Elizabeth Siddal, had William Michael, Lucy, had Cayley, had Collinson?

3

Her prayers and ecstasies she poured forth in her prose when her poetry ran dry of prayers and praise. This is from *Called to Be Saints*:

How beautiful are the arms which have embraced Christ—the eyes which have gazed upon Christ, the lips which have spoken with Christ, the feet which have followed Christ. How beautiful are the hands which have worked the works of Christ, the feet which treading in His footsteps have gone about doing good, the lips which have spread abroad His Name, the lives which have been counted loss for Him.

In her love of form she was an Italian, as we have noted; but she was a romantic too, like Salvator Rosa who set his classic ruins against a background of ferocious chasms, savage water-

falls, and peopled them with desperadoes, ragged monks, and bandits. Her religious prose tracts are full of this conflict and the emotions sublime and ferocious, hopeful and desperate, that were warring within. When her friend Gertrude Thomson, a popular illustrator of children's books, did some of her pretty postcard fairies so much liked in their day, to illustrate a children's book, Christina's lack of humor betrayed her. The fairies were nude, and perhaps, she told Miss Thomson, women artists ought not to paint nudes. She wrote to her pious friend Frederic Shields about this, but he did not agree.

Something sad, savage, stern, arose in her. Was it possible that a man so gifted, so orthodox in his faith could disagree with her on so delicate, so dangerous a practice? She was right—her conscience told her so. But it meant that she would have to pray for Shields as well as for Gertrude Thomson, because she admired them both. It was in this passionate ferocity of mind that she pasted the strips of paper across passages in books that seemed offensive to God. Later Katharine Tynan noticed when walking with Christina that she always picked up any stray piece of paper that floated toward her on the street. She explained that she always had a horror of stepping on any piece of paper that had upon it the Holy Name, and to save herself from doing this she made a point of picking up any stray printed or written matter that came her way. But she was, after all, severe with herself if exacting toward others.

Set not thy will to die, and not to live;
Set not thy face as flint refusing heaven;
Thou fool, set not thy heart on hell; forgive
And be forgiven.

The important thing was to keep a purity of heart and vision in a world of belching chimneys, of sprawling sooty houses, of slums, of horrors unnamable, of strange inventions that prom-

ised Paradises and opened suddenly into greater and greater infernos of horror. The Pre-Raphaelites were still searching for the heavenly city, the cool glade-sheltered, and yet somewhat feverish vision of a happier past, an innocent candor, a healing purity. This aspect of their vision, she had always shared; and, as William Gaunt has observed in his study of them, the burning passion for some impossible purity had real value. It helped somewhat to redeem the time, redeem the place, to remind all who would care to listen or see, that the great values of the spirit were still precious, still desirable, and to be attained. In the setting of Victorian slums, of industrialism, this longing and struggle for purity had also the especial value of a talisman. The fascination and hold of the Pre-Raphaelites in their day over the minds of the most sensitive of their generation proved that they appealed to a great secret and inner need. It is this quality that shines through Christina's devotional poems at their best and makes Dorothy Stuart say, "They are as lambent as the glassy sea of the Apocalypse, as wistful as the face of a Florentine Virgin, as gorgeous as the wings of Fra Angelico's red-robed angels, as sonorous as an introit by Palestrina." In plain English they are very good poems indeed.

4

Gentleness and sharpness seem to contend for mastery in her now, and the beautiful manners that in her later years begin to seem too courtly, too old-fashioned. The clock was no longer sounding its slow peal of mild sadness, it was full of quick discordances, irregular beats. She suffered from heart trouble and a spasmodic pain in her right breast, a pain that seemed to respond to medical treatment, and then returned again. Nor could her deep faith, her endless devotion cure her of the fear of death. She searched her heart and found it full of sinful feelings, she searched her mind and found it full of

thoughts not as pure as she had hoped to make them. They were unworthy of God's all-searching Eye. All around her she felt eddies of sin and darkness swimming toward her, and a desolate feeling of time misused running to a useless end. Though she had been a remarkably prolific writer (if we remember her prose as well as her poetry) she felt that she had been slothful, her writings of this period are full of self-reproaches. Sloth is their theme, this soft, self-consuming vice that ate away time, that gnawed away salvation. She writes in *Time Flies*:

Sloth does not at a first glance seem the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, yet under one aspect it can fairly be reckoned such. The others may consist with energy, and energy may always be turned to good account.

Sloth precludes energy.

Sloth may accompany a great many amiable tempers and skin-deep charms: but sloth runs no race.

And a race is the one thing set before us. We are not summoned to pose picturesquely in *tableaux vivants*, or die away gracefully like dissolving views.

We are called to run a race, and woe is us if we run it not lawfully, and with patience and with pressing toward the mark.

It is never too early, but ere long it may be too late.

Writing poetry gave her pleasure, it was best to please God and not herself. Something severe and difficult was necessary to please God. She wrote fewer poems and more tracts. She spent more time in good works among the poor, in the uncongenial labor of reading the manuscripts of humble admirers who had read her verse and prose mainly in church papers, and asked for literary, spiritual, and often material help. There she was both severe and kindly. If she recommended a protégée for a post she was always careful to point out the faults as well as virtues of the person she recommended. When a poet, whom her brother and his friends had raised from extreme poverty

and obscurity into some fame and a good post as custodian of the Shakespeare house in Stratford, wrote that he could not endure the job because his sensitive soul was shocked at the irreverent and ignorant remarks made by visitors (mainly visiting Americans) about the Bard, Christina was unmoved.* She refused to be helpful about placing him elsewhere and said in the politest and firmest terms imaginable that his talents were not great enough for such a display of temperament. She had never spared herself a disagreeable duty. Side by side with this harshness came a deeper compassion for human suffering, and even when writing about animals in one of her least fortunate poems this deepened feeling was evident:

Pity the sorrows of a poor old dog
Who wags his tail a-begging in his need;
Despise not even the sorrows of a frog,
God's creature too, and that's enough to plead;
Spare puss who trusts us purring on our hearth;
Spare bunny, once so frisky and so free;
Spare all the harmless creatures of the earth:
Spare, and be spared—or who shall plead for thee?

Her outward austerities sometimes aroused impatience from less devout people, but she could ignore them, intent on her own salvation. The softness, the desire to love and be loved, the desire to please at the expense even of her conscience had now gone. The shadows were beginning to break, the dark was approaching when no man could work. She wrote again in *Time Flies*: "Most people, I assume, have no private or personal enemies of their own; but as long as they themselves are ranged on God's side, God's enemies become theirs." In the first of her devotional prose works, *Annus Domini*, she had written:

* It is possible that Henry James based his story "The Birthplace" on the complaints of this custodian of the Bard's birthplace. Not knowing the facts, he was more sympathetic than Christina. The poet was Joseph Skipsey, an ex-miner.

"O Lord Jesus Christ . . . forgive and purge the unholiness of Thy little ones, the unholiness of Thy penitents, the unholiness of the unconverted, the unholiness of me a sinner."

She was fervent in her prayers for God's mercy, and her humility with its faintest tinge of spiritual arrogance astonished the few visitors to her home from the literary world. To all who saw her, this somewhat stout, badly dressed, and ailing woman, whose wonderful eyes and lovely voice were all that survived of past beauty, appeared to be a saint. It was about this time that she wrote in concluding her prose masterpiece, the commentary on the Apocalypse: "If I have been overbold in attempting such a work as this I beg pardon." Whether this was addressed to God or to the public, we do not know.

5

The world was changing indeed, but in the world of the arts Dante Gabriel's name had become more magical than ever. Men who had been his humble disciples were now reaping success and honors. Burne-Jones, golden-bearded and graceful, was a hero of the drawing rooms; William Morris had come out of his medieval, tapestry-hung house and was beginning to contemplate the world with eyes that looked into the next century. The vision, or rather nightmare, drove him half mad. Perhaps the evils and the horrors that he foresaw could be averted; perhaps there was hope. He tried to cure them with art and socialism—an artistic socialism, if possible. Or perhaps it were better to discard all art for a while, to make a clean sweep and begin again with a new art—what would it be?—and a new society. His dreams were full of the revolutionary recklessness of the very rich.

But Time and History did not stop for him. The rich, handsome, courted Millais, living in a palace, sat at each fashionable banquet like a reigning prince. His beautiful wife (for-

merly Ruskin's) received visitors at the head of his marble stairs, dressed in the yellow-gold satin that he loved to see her in. Everyone thought his children beautiful. He was never tired of painting them, and they were reproduced on magazine covers and in soap advertisements. He had reached the ultimate heights of fame without offending anyone—or hardly anyone. True, some cynical youngsters had begun to come back from Paris with strange ideas about painting learned from those odd French impressionists, and recently a little bounder, called Whistler, had come to town—an American, of course. Was it he, or that clever young Irishman Oscar Wilde (who was beginning to be talked about), who had actually said somewhere that Millais was a sneak and had stolen his wife from Ruskin and the best in his art from Rossetti. This was unfair to an artist who was an honest man and a sportsman too! They had forgotten how quickly he had thrown off the Italian's spell and left the Pre-Raphaelites, returning to his early safe, wholesome, and popular concepts of art.

Yet sometimes Millais turned to look at some of his early work done under Dante Gabriel's spell, and his heart failed him. What was it about Rossetti that had quickened his pulse, sharpened something strong and strange and alien in his nature, and made his marble halls and his prosperity crumble about him into air and nothingness? These early paintings were not as good as his later works, and on their account he had been severely attacked for the first and last time in his career. There had been a chilling prospect of unprosperity, of failure, that brought him close to the dark abyss feared by all around him. He had had real enemies who snarled, who threw critical stones, who made him feel that he was not born for admiration, for fame, for love. But how different all life had looked under the gaze of the sensual-lipped golden-voiced ingratiating Italian! So all Dante

Gabriel's friends thought, remembering him; and they spread stories of that glory and gold.

A little of the spilled gold and glory clung to the quiet, devout spinster in her very mid-Victorian parlor in Torrington Square. The maiden lady who bore the sacred and esoteric name of Rossetti and was the writer of "Goblin Market" and of children's verses and devotional works found that her brother's legend and fame were beginning to sell her books and increase her own legend. The sale (especially of her poetry) was still small and insecure. It was the faith and enthusiasm of her poetry-loving publisher, Alexander Macmillan, that brought her books regular publication and assured her future sales and fame. No wonder that Christina in an unaccustomed burst of effusive affection called him "the dauntless Mac"!

But if something of the Pre-Raphaelite glamour clung to Christina and made her a romantic figure to the younger generation of poets she herself was apathetic to the new groups. On the whole she followed her feminine contemporaries with an interested but not too enthusiastic eye. Jean Ingelow was still going into edition after edition; Mary Coleridge had the Coleridgean sensibility; the vigorous, public-spirited Augusta Webster, everybody said, was the true successor to Mrs. Browning—some even said she was like Mr. Browning too; and there was Mathilde Blind, a socialist and a friend of William Michael Rossetti and of Karl Marx. She praised them all, and yet somehow her praise sounded tepid—she was remote from all of them. Every road now led to the Heavenly City she hoped to reach after this life, her poems were written only for the Great Taskmaster's eye—and sometimes for that of William Michael, the most friendly and helpful of critics. But he was not Dante Gabriel.

6

She saw very little of her brother's old friends—they brought into her shadowed rooms the memory of a sun that had blazed too brightly. Very, very occasionally now she saw Jane and William Morris; not too often, the now very fashionable Burne-Jones; but one could not shake off Theodore Watts-Dunton. He could make himself lovable to all by whom he wished to be loved, and he never deserted a rising star or an established literary reputation.

But there were other people whose society gave her more pleasure, and of whose orthodoxy in Anglican doctrine she had no doubt. There was always dear Frederic Shields, whose piety and genius went hand in hand; there were the many cultivated clergymen who read and admired and discussed with her her latest tracts; there were the humble and obscure poetesses who came to her with their spiritual doubts and fears, and bad manuscripts, but admitted that her work had fortified and strengthened their faith. This really gave her more pleasure than the conventional praise of recognized literary critics. Though one of the fine artists among English poets, she was enough of a Victorian to feel that art in itself was not enough. She had received so much pleasure in writing her poems that she had almost felt them as a self-indulgence.

The younger poets did not always show the complete religious fervor that had been shown in the days when she was a girl and Pusey and Keble and Newman, Manning and Faber had been on the lips of every undergraduate at Oxford. Even those who had not been at Oxford had caught fire. How absorbed in his faith poor Collinson had been, how it had harassed him and molded his life for better or worse! Then there was her brother's old friend the artist James Smetham, an early friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, a passionately devout Methodist. Someone had

said that painting was his profession and enjoyment, but religion was his life. Though he suffered constant mental and physical breakdowns, though he lost his eyesight (the affliction most terrible to a painter), his faith remained unshaken, he was fortified by an inner light. It was unfortunate, Christina reflected, that he was a Methodist; but he had at least devoted his life to something greater than art. Of Cardinal Newman at his death she could write with emotion and charity, if not with complete approval:

O weary Champion of the Cross, lie still:
Sleep thou at length the all-embracing sleep.

.

Now fixed and finished thine eternal plan,
Thy best has done its best, thy worst its worst:
Thy best its best, please God, thy best its best.

7

The beauty and truth of the Anglican Church became clearer to her as she grew older. For it she wrote some of its most beautiful litanies, humble and yet assured, litanies that have a strangely modern touch of diction that sometimes reminds us of passages in T. S. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*:

O Saviour, show compassion!
Because, if Thou reject us, who shall receive us?
O Saviour, show compassion,
Because we are half-dead yet not wholly dead.
O Saviour, show compassion,
Because Thou art the Good Samaritan, the Good Physician; bind up
our wounds, pouring in Thine oil and wine, take care of us,
provide for us, set us forward on our way, bring us home.
And because Thou lovest us, even for Thine own sake,
O Saviour, show compassion!

And no one has paid a greater tribute to the Anglican Church, a tribute that breathes eloquence and sincerity:

To myself it is the beloved Anglican Church of my baptism; a branch of that one Holy Catholic Apostolic Church which is authoritatively commended and endeared to every Christian by the Word of God. . . . Let us be provoked to good works by those with whom we cannot agree, yet who in many ways set us a pattern. . . . I at least can learn much from the devotion of Catholic Rome, the immutability of Catholic Greece, the philanthropic piety of Quakerism, the zeal of many a protestant. . . . And when the Anglican Church reduced to practice each virtue from every source, of holding fast, meanwhile her own goodly heritage of gifts and graces, then may these others likewise learn from her: until to every church, congregation, soul, God be all in all.

This is not a narrow faith or a petty one. Religion was a skull that she set on the table; but through its hollow terror she felt the mystery of immortality, the mystery of life. The small prejudices, the little crotchets, the fear of woman suffrage, her pious dislike of cremation, the self-appointed censorship of her own reading, her self-flagellations, affected mainly herself. We can leave her in her dim writing room in Torrington Square, often ill, often despondent, but kept alive by a faith that was preparing her (or so she thought) to meet death. Her love of God only heightened her human affections:

Yet while I love my God the most, I deem
That I can never love you overmuch;
I love Him more, so let me love you too;
Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such
I cannot love you if I love not Him,
I cannot love Him if I love not you.

These lines apparently written to an earthly lover had now become the keynote to all her human affections, weakened though they were by pain, exhaustion, and the apprehension of death.



Silence and Sound: The Later Years

IT was not without increased suffering now that the years went by in 30 Torrington Square. The pain in Christina's breast, in her left shoulder came and went; only her faith gave the consolation and the strength to endure all in silence. Her poems came less easily. For the first time she felt that her gifts must be exercised with painful labor. There had been a time when her poems came to her out of the clouds; the right words, the right music had shaped themselves as if fashioned by some invisible master who had only used her as his instrument. Now the very sight of pen and paper often filled her with distaste. Writing was a duty, not a pleasure.

But it was beautiful to watch the slow return of the seasons over Torrington Square, to hear the sound of voices outdoors, and watch the long, slow, melancholy, English twilights fall over the sooty brick walls. That long twilight was now a part of her, and it lingered in the few verses that still came to her with some difficulty and always assumed the same images. There was always the image of a grave standing open in a winter landscape, patiently waiting for its fading inhabitant. Sometimes she saw herself in double image, her living self and another self, a pale ghost with drawn angry features and passionate eyes full of frustration. It was a relief to meet the lyric spring weather again, when all was light, aerial, and almost full of youthful hope; and autumn was beautiful too over the square in its graceful tender melancholy, breathing the mood

of the best of her later poetry. But winter was terrifying. Something lost, remote, and passionate from the ancestral Italian past arose in her and fought against the white death of the snow, the slow, pale death that crept upon her when the cold and the darkness and the gloom of the season began to come closer.

2

A few years earlier she had heard of the death of John Collinson, to whom she had dedicated her brief, too quickly frozen spring. Memories of that sad period long forgotten now arose within her gloom-shadowed mind. Her father was threatened with blindness; he was afraid that he would have to give up his post at King's College. She had been sent to Aunt Charlotte Polidori to be trained as a governess—poor Aunt Charlotte who now was dying, upstairs, in the sparsely inhabited house in Torrington Square.

She, Christina, might have ended her days like her aunt, first as a successful governess in a great house and after the children taught had grown up and rewarded her with their thanks and a small pension which could have been added to her small savings, she might have returned—where? She might have reminded herself that she had been singularly fortunate. Poor Collinson's life had been a dismal failure. Even his religion had failed him at the last, and his art had died long before. But she remembered that she had been fortunate and, knowing how difficult it was to overcome her unreasonable melancholy, felt a new note of guilt, of fear, creep into her incessant prayers. However, she put on her best face before the stray visitors who penetrated into her now legendary house to see the famous poet, the sister of Dante Gabriel. Among them was the young Irish poet Katharine Tynan, who has left the most vivid report of Christina Rossetti in her last years. No one was better fitted than she to break down the walls of Christina's melancholy

reserve. Nature had indeed endowed her with all the gifts needed to break down impregnable walls, subtle snobberies. It is a rare talent and, when it accompanies a charming if slight literary gift, may offer the owner an easy road to fame.

Katharine Tynan was young but not pretty; she had very little learning, but her writings show warmth and charm, an easy, facile, ingratiating Irish charm with no distinction. Her social gifts consisted in an unerring instinct (a gift not unworthy of admiration) for discovering people before they were famous, and striking up an intimacy with them that in later years made them feel obliged to her. She had a way with the famous and established too, a youthful, sincere flattery that warmed the heart, and made them see in her warm, wide, blue, spectacled Irish eyes the adoring unquestioning gaze of eternal fame. She had just discovered young Willy Yeats, and he was glad to come to her home outside Dublin and read his poems to her. She always saw that he was well fed, for he was a growing boy (a few years younger than herself) and always hungry; and he treated her, though they were almost of an age, as a distinguished and established poet, which in fact she almost was. There were others, too, as her warm, kindly, unmalicious autobiographies make clear, but she seems to have died unaware that an obscure, scholarly Jesuit priest whom she had met as a girl in Dublin and had admired and flattered wrote to a friend in England about her. The Jesuit was, of course, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the friend was Robert Bridges:

I have made the acquaintance of the young ingenious poetess Miss Kate Tynan, a good creature, and very graceful writer highly and indeed somewhat too highly praised by a wonderful perhaps alarming unanimity . . . for the truth is she is not exactly an original fountain in a shady grove (the critics would not be standing around her so soon if she really were) but rather a sparkling town fountain in public gardens and draws her water from other sources.

Half-shamed pleasure came over the learned and saintly Father Hopkins when he repeated her compliments (she had told him among other things that, though he was approaching forty, he looked like a boy of sixteen), and then irritation when she wrote him too many letters. He was slow in answering them, "and as long as I do not, I cannot help telling myself very bar-barously that I have stopped her jaw at any rate."

But Father Hopkins was not her earliest conquest. The really well known, the popular great ones of her day could not resist her warm sincere flowing flattery. It approached perilously close to what her countrymen would have called blarney. Among her friends were the second Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India, known to poetry as Owen Meredith, Alice Meynell and her very fashionable and powerful literary coterie, and almost everyone else of consequence in literary London, and that branch of society that cultivated the literati. To all these, Christina Rossetti had seemed so strangely remote that it was hard to believe that she breathed and moved in London. It was known that she lived a secluded and austere life, that she was oftener in the company of well known clergymen than of well known literary figures. Gosse had called her the Queen of the Pre-Raphaelites, and something splendid and exotic had begun to breathe from her name and poems.

The world was indeed unlike the world of her girlhood and youth. The Prince of Wales and his beautiful Alexandra were setting the social tone, and they were introducing a manner that was somehow too easy, relaxed, elegant (in a florid way) to be quite good. Where was the fervor of Kingsley, of Ruskin, or the moral ardor of Tennyson? Some of the younger critics had even begun to poke fun at the Laureate, and he fought back with ~~virtuous~~ indignant. It was all the fault of France, the old enemy, "the poisonous honey stolen from France" in his

phrase. Sarcasm, a little too heavy-handed to be effective, stepped in to point his disgust:

Authors—essayist, atheist, novelist, realist, rhymester, play your part,
Paint the moral shame of nature with the living hues of Art.

Rip your brothers' vices open, strip your own foul passions bare;
Down with Reticence, down with Reverence—forward—naked—let
them stare.

.

Set the maiden fancies wallowing in the troughs of Zolaism—
Forward, forward, ay and backward, downward too into the abyss.

But though Christina too belonged so much to the Mid-Victorian period, some alien and contradictory force, something timeless in her work made her not unsympathetic to the younger generation. Her graceful withdrawn melancholy, her exquisite, almost exotic music, even the un-English, un-Anglican fervor of her devotional verse had their attraction for a generation that did not disapprove of religion if it had something exotic and ceremonial about it. Alice Meynell and her circle were beginning to make Catholicism fashionable in poetry. Coventry Patmore had learned how to combine uxoriousness and religious passion in stately verse; some of the severer critics of the period like Lionel Johnson began to discover that they preferred Christina's poems to her brother's; and it was really amazing how many people (to Mr. Browning's grief, indignation and surprise) were saying in spite of Christina's modest disclaimer that they preferred her poems to Elizabeth Browning's! When Katharine Tynan showed her note of invitation from Christina Rossetti, Mrs. Meynell said in a hushed tone, "Then you will have the privilege of seeing a saint.".

3

How had Miss Tynan received her letter of invitation from Christina Rossetti? It had not been difficult. She had begun by sending Christina her own new book of poems, and an effusive letter expressing admiration and a desire to see her. Christina had examined the book and had answered carefully, ending: "But beyond all gifts I account graces, and therefore the piety of your work fills me with hopes far beyond any to be raised by music or diction. If you have honoured my work . . . by thinking it worth imitating, much more may I your spirit." And she sent the young poet a copy of one of her prose devotions, *Time Flies*.

The first visit took place in 1886, and Christina expanded under the warm Irish gaze, the voluble gush of admiration. The guest's questions were so naïve and direct that she became almost gossipy and chatty. Miss Tynan took the right line as if by instinct. Looking at a portrait of Lucy Rossetti, she said that she thought it proved her far more beautiful than Elizabeth Siddal. This pleased Christina, without her knowing why; but then, as if to punish herself for her thoughts, she began to talk about poor Lizzie. She remembered that Lizzie and Mrs. William Morris had been married in the same year, and that no one could say which was the more beautiful bride. She also talked of her godchild Ursula Hake, the daughter of the doctor-poet whose verses had been so much admired by the Pre-Raphaelite coteries. She was very hopeful of the child's dawning graces and piety, and had given her her own string of corals and a pretty little Bible. With wistful reverent affection she talked of her friend Cayley, and presented Miss Tynan with several volumes of his from among the many, alas, unsold copies that had been his legacy to her. Some of these, she had sent to various church bazaars. "You are stripping yourself," said the

tactful guest. Christina answered eagerly and truthfully, "Oh, no!"

Miss Tynan had been taken aback at first seeing her. Christina wore serviceable skirts of iron-gray tweed and stout masculine boots. They did not seem to agree with the worn, delicately archaic face or with the poetry. Somehow she had expected beautiful trailing robes, and a diamond star in the still dark hair, like Mrs. Meynell, who always seemed to resemble her own poetry. It was as if Christina had deliberately made the worst of herself. Then she appeared strangely cheerful, almost breezy. Alas! she was really neither cheerful nor robust, nor could Miss Tynan guess that on the instructions of her spiritual adviser she had again felt it her Christian duty to be as cheerful, as hopeful as possible.

One day, Miss Tynan had a feeling that Christina's cheerfulness had sunk very low. The shadow of her mother's death darkened the house; the noble old face that had glimmered and glowed beside her in the evening fire, in the winter dusks, still haunted the house. Miss Tynan afterward wrote of the atmosphere breathing of death, of old age, of sadness, that seemed to cling to Christina in this gloomy interior. Her warm nature, sternly disciplined, had become accustomed to her long holidayless sojourns in London, though in 1883 she wrote to Mrs. Seddon, who was staying at Birchington-on-the-Sea, and with whom she had evidently condoled for having to spend the month of August in London and then felt that she might have sounded snobbish or pretentious:

I hope I did not sound "grand" when I pitied you for the end of August in London: it is my usual fate to be there part if not whole of that unfashionable month. So let me not add hypocrisy to elegance. I hope you and yours have carried some Birchington bloom back to Westminster, roses warranted to stand washing and wear.

Gone were the days when Gosse had found her sitting alone in the midst of a noisy drawing room like a pillar of cloud, a sibyl whom no one had the audacity to approach. A painful humility was now more than ever evident in her correspondence and conversation. To Watts-Dunton after having asked him to help an Italian friend obtain a post in England, she wrote:

I have written to my publishers and others all in vain, seeking work for him. To you I write not hopefully and anxious not to be tiresome, yet thinking you will pardon me under the circumstances,—you, assuredly, not being one to grudge efforts for a distressed friend. Don't answer me, and I shall feel that I cannot have bored you unpardonably!

To Mrs. Charles Kingsley, who had written asking a contribution to a magazine of which her daughter was editor, Christina wrote:

I should like very much to see my name on Miss Kingsley's staff, but I never had my verse writing power so under command as to be able to count on its exercise, and my last little book pretty well exhausted my last scrap. Now I am feeling as if I may have written my final book,—notwithstanding a hope that it may not turn out so after all! Yet in such a mood I dare not make or imply any promise of a contribution, and must beg to remain your *obscure* well-wisher. Please do not think me disobliging for not exerting a power I have no certainty of possessing.

To her sister-in-law she wrote mentioning Miss Tynan as "an agreeable young woman, and deferential enough to puff me up like puff-paste."

The young Irishwoman, who was to become a lifelong friend of William Michael and his family, had sent Christina books written by herself or her friends. Among them was a volume of verse by Rosa Mulholland, an Irish poet much admired by

certain groups in her own day and country, whom Christina refused to puff: "Don't you ever publish a volume unless you are quite sure you can excel (say) Mr. W. Shakespear," she wrote of it to Lucy.

It was noticed that her criticism became sharper and keener as she grew older, that she apparently no longer cared to make concessions to politeness. Her aloofness from literary society also kept her free from those ties so fatal to critical impartiality. But to her clever young nephew Arthur, and to her nieces, Olive, Helen, and Mary, she was apt to show partiality. To her fond eyes they were developing "alarming tendencies" to genius. She had nothing but admiration for the poems, short stories, verse-dramas they submitted to her. To her sister-in-law, who looked like a Pre-Raphaelite painting, but whose advanced spirit would not have scorned a modern art photographer, Christina always wrote affectionate deprecating letters.

Lucy, who, in spite of her freethinking, always retained Christina's awe and respect, sent her a notice in 1886 of a raffle got up by Ford Madox Brown for the benefit of the widow and daughter of an old friend, a French painter of Irish extraction. Christina answered that she would have liked to show her sympathy by buying a guinea ticket: "But pray believe in my bodiless sympathy and good will. We poets judging by myself are not an opulent race." The weather had been very cold, there had been riots and social unrest, and this led her to a theme which she had often discussed with her sister-in-law. She disapproved of lawbreaking and the riots were lawless:

But, however one may deplore lawlessness, it is heart-sickening to think of the terrible want of work and want of all things at our doors,—we so comfortable. Emigration is the only adequate remedy which presents itself to my imagination: and that, of course, may leave the mother country to die of inanition a stage further on: yet no one can we call upon to starve to-day lest England should prove

powerless to hold her own to-morrow. You see, my politics are not very intricate.

They were not. Politics were not very real to her, but her own human affections became more and more necessary. She ended her letter irrelevantly: "Tomorrow is our dear Maria's birthday. My irreplaceable sister and friend."

Her intelligent nieces and nephews were indeed a source of gratification and pleasure, they were so well educated, so full of advanced ideas in art and politics; their religion, poor things, was the religion or lack of religion—they had been brought up in. She might well have prayed fervently for them in her solitary evenings, but she had learned not to discuss religion with Lucy and William. The children not only wrote poetry and plays, but brought out a little family newspaper in which they discussed art and politics. In fact, they showed signs of becoming what they later became—very cultivated and art-loving scions of a literary and artistic family. They received so much encouragement that some of the impetus and struggle necessary for real creative achievement was removed; but, if their contribution to the arts was not all that their progenitors hoped, they did eventually, like their parents, make their homes centers of literary and artistic activities.

Their cousin Ford Madox Hueffer later recalled the William Michael Rossetti household of his youth, the cleverness of Olivia, of Helen, of Mary, of Arthur, in acting and writing their own plays, the serious approval of their parents, the awesome evening soirées where distinguished poets were asked to give a reading of their own work and the impressive silence in which the reading was heard. He felt awkward, uncultivated, and slow with his quick-witted, poised cousins, but his literary career must have begun with the impetus first received from the circle of his uncle and aunt; and if he appeared to revolt from the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, his friends discovered in his last years that

he was constantly returning to it. His attitude toward Christina, who usually received him with absent-minded courtesy, was always one of admiration and reverence.

5

But poor Lucy Rossetti's health became worse and worse. One day while nursing a sick child, she caught a chill; the chill developed into bronchitis and then pneumonia. She recovered, but her lungs were permanently affected. Christina in such a crisis was at her best: she offered to pay for a trip to Italy, she offered her services as a nurse. There was very little she could do; the children, capable and efficient and modern, had learned to take care of their absent-minded and artistic parents and did it with efficiency. They introduced their aunt to a friend, Lisa Wilson, who wrote poetry and was a protégée of their father. She became one of Christina's closest friends, bringing an air of youthful warmth, affection, and understanding admiration into her clouded later years. In Lisa Wilson she must have felt that she was discovering a daughter—a daughter who shared her religious beliefs.

From time to time when Lucy Rossetti was better and could give one of her "at homes" Christina attended and sat in a corner while William Michael's protégés among the young poets performed. She sat there like a shadow from another age. There must always have been a suppressed disagreement with Lucy and a fear of offending her. In April, 1891, we find her writing to William Michael:

Please give my love to Lucy; and explain that I was on my way to say good-bye when the door at which I was presenting myself shut, and shut me out: I dare say she detects that I am still sufficiently shy to lose heart under such a rebuff. The "at home" seemed to me very successful, and I only regret not having had a glimpse of your library. What a beautiful stair carpet.

Love to any who love me—but really that is quite unChristian!—to all who do and to any who don't!

When she was not carried away by her private affections or her religious beliefs she was as sensible and sensitive as ever in her criticism of her contemporaries. Morley Roberts had sent her his first book of verse, called *Songs of Energy*. He must have been a friend of William Michael for the poems were of a kind that at this time ran side by side with the languors and lilies of Ernest Dowson, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, Lionel Johnson, the very young William Butler Yeats. One forgets that powerfully armed against this group, which seemed to unite mingled streams from the Pre-Raphaelites and the French symbolists, were the vigorous W. E. Henley, the social-minded John Davidson, and the young Kipling. Both schools had a future but Morley Roberts's book was prophetic, for he became a friend of Gissing and a well known novelist. Christina wrote to William Michael, who was sympathetic to poems: "I think him clever,—but what is the use of *cleverness* in matters poetic? . . . The goodness of his actual work gives me the idea that if he could he would work *well* in a different field." She no longer spent time, pain, and thought on mediocrities, unless her religious convictions were touched. As early as 1885, we find her writing to her friend the Reverend Fredrick Gurney about Wagner, whose music was now all the rage in advanced circles:

What shall I say of *Parsifal*? I will make an avowal: I would not dare on any account to see it performed. I should not dare witness such a treatment of such a subject. That it is rich in beauty, charm—I do not doubt—in loftiness—I will not question, but I cannot think it will edify myself.

On an October noon in 1893, Christina called on Lucy Rossetti.

Lucy, who was about to leave for the Riviera with her three daughters, for her health's sake, had been brought up in the Pre-Raphaelite tenets of art but was groping in an unconscious revolt against her adored, powerful father Ford Madox Brown, her overwhelming brother-in-law, her overwhelming mother-in-law, and her powerful sister-in-law. As a girl she had begun painting pictures that were exhibited, and were admired and bought by wealthy Pre-Raphaelite and American collectors. She might have had a career if she had not thrown herself into family life with such zeal. She had been a good wife, an excellent mother, although in the midst of her household duties her head had been full of unwritten books, unpainted pictures.

The death of Lucy's father soon after she reached Italy had to be kept from her for fear of its effect on her precarious health. To William Michael and Christina it must have brought back memories of the tall vigorous fair-haired man, distracted by poverty and lack of recognition, who had brought his motherless little girl to their home for their mother to bring up. Humbly, timidly, Christina offered to go out to Lucy in Italy since her brother could not leave his post. She spoke of having sufficient funds and again offered to be a nurse: "Of course I would not be an expense to my family, and perhaps the girls might find some sort of support in the presence of one who might be their grandmother." But she was far from well herself, and both William Michael and Lucy persuaded her not to go. There is a note of pain in her answers, a feeling that she was not useful, not wanted. Nothing was left but to fortify her soul in patience. One agrees with her perceptive biographer Dorothy Stuart in looking back on her last years:

That unpicturesque and unimpressive elderly spinster, whose daily life was a round of trivial tasks broken into segments by the appointed hours of meditation and prayer, that shy, serious, frumpishly attired lady, tending her ferns, making scrap-books for sick children,

petting her cat, copying her own verse in a fair Italian hand, . . . suddenly [appears] with the golden majesty of a mediaeval Saint, virgin, visionary, martyr.

Aunt Charlotte had died in 1890. Aunt Eliza, the last of the shadowy spinster aunts, barely able to speak or move from weakness in her upstairs bedroom, lingered on for three years more, the object of her solicitude. To Jean Ingelow, who had once aroused twinges of jealousy because her poems were so much more admired, Christina wrote, "If you are a recluse, so much more I suspect am I." The sense of pain and exhaustion was apparent in her writings:

How tired a face, how tired a brain, how tired
 A heart I lift, who long
 For something never felt but still desired;
 Sunshine and song,
 Song where the choirs of sunny heaven stand choired.

7

Lucy was still ill in the early spring of 1893, and Christina had all she could do to console the harassed William Michael. She was all alone now in the dark brown gloom of Torrington Square. Aunt Eliza's death at last had left a silence that was full of sounds. She who had written so often of the vanities of desire, still had her long backward look of longing for the dead, for all her dead:

Still my heart's love, thou,
 In thy secret way,
 Art still remembered now:
 Who shall say—
 Still rememberest thou?

The long "blackthorn winter" came again and made her shiver. She could no longer deny that the state of her own health

was as critical as Lucy's. Her doctor thought that she needed an operation, but her heart condition would not permit it. Her trouble was cancer of the breast, but she wrote carefully about it to William: "Some mischief is going on, but happily slowly. So you see there is nothing to debate about at present, 'and underneath are the Everlasting Arms.'" She went on to add that she was glad to escape the heavy expense of an operation. She was putting aside everything she could spare to leave to William and his children. It was the least she could do for a being who had devoted his whole life to the service of his family. "The body is a burden," she had once written in *Seek and Find*, nor did she hide her fear of death. Unsinned sins, imaginary scruples, hair-fine and tenuous, obsessed her. She had failed in a duty there, she had been amiss somewhere, somehow, she had neglected something—all was sin and vanity. The fear of death came over the long streets, over that London that was not the London of her youth. As the victorias, landaus, and hansom cabs clattered down the time-shaded streets she may have been sensitive enough to feel the subtle change that was carrying Victorian England away into the hectic, brilliant, doomshad-ed Edwardian era.

Old fears and new fears began to unnerve her. "But I, Lord, am sore afraid, I am afraid of thee, of death, of myself, yea rather of Thee because I fear my own self. The sting of death is sin." And again she wrote of a God who had become frightfully harsh and threatening: "Thou who didst endure for us the cold night of Thy passion: deliver us from the winter, the night, the woe of eternal death. Thou who didst die and revive for us: deliver us from the fruitless, woeful eternity of death."

The deaths of her last surviving aunt and her mother had, as we have seen, made her financially independent at last, and she was now receiving a little income from her poems and devotional works. Carefully she made her will providing for William

and his family "a poor compensation for the years of dependence." William protested that she was overscrupulous, but she conscientiously noted that the least she owed him was £2,000 for the years from 1854 to 1876.

8

Her niece Helen, afterward Signora Agresti, remembers her in these later days as a middle-aged woman in ugly Victorian clothes seated in her little back parlor on Torrington Square overlooking a sooty backyard. Her aunt's large overprominent eyes seemed now to be always a little watchful, as if looking into some unspoken fear, and she was absent-mindedly oblivious to her surroundings. Helen remembered the pleasure her aunt took in watering some orange-pips that she had grown in little pots and kept on a small balcony. Christina wrote to her brother, who had tried to lure her out of her solitude:

I yet am well content in my shady crevice: which crevice enjoys the unique advantage of being to my certain knowledge the place assigned me. And in my small way I have my small interests and small pleasures. To-day I presented Mr. Stewart with a *Shadow of Dante*, and believe it was received with real gratification.

Memories of her beloved dead were now always with her. She could not visit Dante Gabriel's grave beside the sea-haunted town of Birchington; but she visited Maria's grave frequently and prayed beside it. She visited her mother's grave, bringing large bunches of chrysanthemums, remembering her mother's love of flowers. She stopped at little Michael's grave often now, and at her father's; but if she stopped to pray beside the grave of poor Elizabeth Siddal she has left no written or spoken record of it.

There were moments of cheerfulness: a visit from Lisa Wilson, whose girlish admiration tempered by the proper piety kept her

pleased; a visit from dear Frederic Shields, who showed her his pictures. There was a long conversation about Dante with William Michael which she records with pleasure:

Perhaps it is enough to be half an Italian, but certainly it is enough to be a Rossetti, to render Dante a fascinating centre of thought; moreover, I am not sure that my dear old Grandfather did not outrun my Father in admiration for the poet *as a poet*.

Moments of unreasonable pleasure flowed through her as she read Dante again, or Petrarch, or looked at the potted orange slips on her balcony. London or Italy? Her spirits fell, rose, fluctuated between summer and winter; and then again came the pain in her breast, the feeling of suffocation, the inability to breathe.

To Lucy, whose pulmonary disease was in its last stages, she wrote in 1892 of her own disabilities, adding: "Various kind souls will remember me in prayer, and each one who joins the praying band confers on me a favour beyond money and beyond price. I have asked the prayers of the congregation at my Church, but without my name being given out." Perhaps, knowing that Lucy was a freethinker, she was hinting that she too would find benefit and renewed health in prayer. Again when her doctor's report had not been cheerful, she wrote that she was resigned to whatever God would send: "What then? The sweeter after the stripped earth will be the shady rest of Paradise. Not that I arrogate to myself so blessed an end, but God's mercy to sinners is infinite."

We do not know what answer Lucy made to these letters. She who was a long time dying was preparing herself for death with philosophic rather than Christian fortitude. Christina told her that she had been asked to distribute prizes in a girls' school in Weston-super-Mare. "My answer was an unflinching 'No.'"

She had recently made a friend of her doctor, whose name

now appears frequently in her letters, Edward Stewart. His son, Dr. Edward Stewart, was making a great name for himself in his profession and had recently married Lady Philippa Howard, a sister of the Duke of Norfolk, a lady as philanthropic and pious as herself, though a Roman Catholic. The wedding brought forth some pleased and fluttery notes to Lucy, and she wrote of herself, "I am not conspicuously in bloom, but let us hope I resemble the trampled camomile which yields more sweets the while." Lucy had asked her to send the name of the publisher of her book of children's verses, *Sing-Song*, because a bookseller could find no record of it, and she wrote in all humility of that "obscure tome," adding, "But there you see, I am groping in an atmosphere of befogment and my renown is under eclipse."

It was well to abase oneself before the ever darkening face of God as pain and weariness and futility kept growing within her:

All weareth, all wasteth,
All fitteth, all hasteth,
All of flesh and time:—
Sound, sweet heavenly chime,
Ring in the unutterable eternal prime.

Then there were moments when the lyric impulse returned, moments of light that led to song:

Without, within me, music seemed to be;
Something not music yet most musical,
Silence and sound in heavenly harmony.

And then again as if foreseeing the end of hope and fear:

It is over. What is over?
Nay, how much is over truly!—
Harvest days we toiled to sow for;

Now the sheaves are gathered newly,
Now the wheat is garnered duly.

It suffices. What suffices?
All suffices reckoned rightly:
Spring shall bloom where now the ice is,
Roses make the bramble sightly,
And the quickening sun shine brightly,
And the latter wind blow lightly,
And my garden teem with spices.

The image of a garden brimming over with sunlight and warm spices belonged to the poetry of her youth; now only the dark colors entered her verse. Her poems of devotion (and she seldom wrote any other kind of poem now) were both simple and complex, and all paths became one as she approached Him. She might have echoed Alice Meynell's version of Boethius:

Approach, Access, art Thou
Time, Way, and Wayfarer.

And in many of these later devotional verses she achieves that rare thing, a religious poem that is completely successful and that moves even the unbeliever by its terror, emotional intensity, and awe, and the somber muted music and colorless imagery adds to its effect.

9

Walter de la Mare, who has written in recent years one of the few truly appreciative comments on Christina Rossetti's work, has said:

One of the most absurd mistakes . . . concerning a poet is to regard his work as something entirely apart from his life. If that work is true to himself, it cannot but be the most uncompromising, essential,

secret and infallible proof of his inmost spirit and his imagination. In that work he was alone—it is the fruit of his solitude . . . It is a representation, vividly clear, of his reverie, experience and imagination.

With Christina Rossetti's closing years, her work became more and more of a piece. The young girl who, like Mozart, had written with an easy and spontaneous perfection, had become the recluse of Torrington Square, shaken with thoughts of the grave, of eternity. The years fell upon the brown house in the square like so many unflying leaves almost unnoticed in the echoing seasons, like the muted melody rising from her last verses, colorless and gray but lit by secret fires. More and more she developed a quality rare among the poets who were her contemporaries, a fierce love of accuracy, a truthfulness of perception that she demanded from her own work and from all around her. Her young relative Ford Madox Hueffer noticed this when she sometimes corrected his flights of fancy and imagination or inaccurate statements. All was stripped clear to the essential purity of eternity. Death was the black tree against the burning sun; daily she contemplated this image till her tired eyes became accustomed to it. "Sooner or later," she wrote, "we are likely to find accuracy itself a solemn thing: most formidable when infringed, yet sometimes when adhered to only less formidable than when violated; a solemn duty; a solemn discipline."

To a generation that was beginning to revolt against too many solemn duties and disciplines, that was beginning to relapse into the nervous graces and laxness of the Edwardian period, this attitude could not make her popular. But in spite of her weakness and pain a strong concentration of will preserved her gifts. She now wrote too much, she wrote even when ill, she wrote when all her inspiration had fled or flagged. Occasionally in this difficult period which began in the later 1880's and lasted

through the few years still remaining we find the old music, the old ecstasy, the authentic notes of true poetry. Her theme, of course, was the old theme. She had done it in her best vein a few years earlier in "At Last":

Many have sung of love a root of bane:
While to my mind a root of balm it is,
For love at length breeds love; sufficient bliss
For life and death and rising up again.
Surely when light of Heaven makes all things plain,
Love will grow plain with all its mysteries;
Nor shall we need to fetch from over seas
Wisdom or wealth or pleasure safe from pain.
Love in our borders, love within our heart,
Love all in all, we then shall bide at rest,
Ended for ever life's unending quest,
Ended for ever, effort, change, and fear:
Love all in all;—no more that better part
Purchased, but at the cost of all things here.

About 1890, we find her again complaining of a continual pain in her left hand and arm and a recurrent sense of suffocation.

10

We have two vivid descriptions of Christina Rossetti in these later years, one by William Sharp whose verses written under the name Fiona Macleod were to be admired by the young William Butler Yeats, who was better known then as a rising critic of poetry. He was a great admirer of Dante Gabriel and an upholder of the Pre-Raphaelite creed, and we feel his excitement in meeting Christina. Her Quaker-like simplicity of dress struck him, and her extreme passivity. Her pallor too was marked; it seemed to suggest anemia. Like everyone else he noticed her two remarkable features, her eyes and her voice. Of

her eyes he wrote that they had a light alert look, they were expressive "azure grey eyes, a colour which deepened to a dark shadowy velvety grey." Her facial contours were still young and smooth, her hair still a rich brown though a few gray hairs were now mingled in:

I noticed the quick lightning glance, its swift withdrawal, also the restless intermittent fingering of the long thin double watch-guard which hung from below the one piece of colour that she wore, a quaint old-fashioned bow of mauve, a pale purple ribbon fastening a white frill at the neck.

Another young poet, Mackenzie Bell, met her a year before her death:

I shall never forget Christina Rossetti's appearance when I first called upon her. She gave the impression of being tall—none of her portraits sufficiently indicate the commanding breadth of her brow. She looked unquestionably a woman of genius, and it is not every woman of genius that so looks. Her voice attracted me at once; never before had I heard such a voice. It was intensely musical, but its indefinable charm arose not from that cause; it arose in a large measure from what Mr. Watts-Dunton has aptly called her clear-cut method of syllabification, a peculiarity attributable to her foreign lineage. . . . The effect produced was that of a highly educated foreigner thoroughly acquainted with the grammar and vocabulary of the English language—but as if English was not her native tongue.

It was this peculiar charm that entered her poetry, its music and versification, the strange exotic limpid note that she introduced into English poetry in an even greater degree than her brother. Mackenzie Bell describes her as "demurely attired" in a black silk dress. She wore no ornaments now. What he noticed most about her manner and the atmosphere about her was that queer passivity—quietness he calls it, a controlled and ordered sadness. Somewhere in the conversation she mentioned

St. Augustine. "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."

11

Mackenzie Bell was often to see her in her last year, moving painfully around the house on some household task, or lying on a couch in the warm shabby drawing room that was beginning now to take on a faded mid-Victorian charm. The elaborate chandelier of cut glass was its chief feature. It had been presented by Dante Gabriel to her mother and had been made for the formal grandeur of a fine Georgian drawing room. When there was a strong low sun, pendants of this chandelier made vivid prisms on walls and door. Glimmers of dying light trembled for a while over the solid draped Victorian tables, and chairs, and heavy velvet curtains, as if sighing for a beauty that had vanished forever in a changing world.

When the weather permitted, the windows were thrown open on the square, and through the sound of human voices and of traffic came a sense of life, a feeling that there were millions who lived in the world, who loved life and did not fear it. The air blowing in from the open window seemed to dissolve a quarter-century's dust and sadness.

Outside, the few delicate trees nodded and waved and made dark green shadows in the spring, heavy gold-green shadows in the summer, flying yellowish shadows in the early fall, damp gray, nervous shadows in the winter. Conspicuous on the wall was the time-hallowed portrait of Dr. John Polidori, Byron's physician and victim. His self-inflicted death must have haunted the Rossetti women, yet they never parted with the portrait.

Christina was now very careful to guard her tongue, to ward off the occasional acerbities that had at one time been noticed in her; but her conversation was almost too gentle now, too sweet.

In *Time Flies* she had made one of her notes—a guide to self-discipline, self-correction:

How often we judge unjustly when we judge harshly. The fret of temper we despise may have its rise in the agony of some great, unflinching, unsuspected self-sacrifice, or in the sustained strain of self-conquest, or in the endurance of unavowed, almost intolerable pain.

She was happiest in the moments when she felt she had overcome a fault, for her God though supposedly tolerant to weakness really expected perfection. And in these moments when she had gained some small victory over her self she could break into poetry again:

One note for all delights and charities,
One note for hope reviving with the light,
One note for every lovely thing that is;
Till while I sang my heart shook off its cares
And revelled in the land of no more night.

“Painting, poetry and music are the three Powers in man of conversing with Paradise which the Flood did not sweep away,” William Blake had once written. Poetry was her one entrance to Paradise, and lately she who had written so easily found herself faced with the dreadful dryness of the creative faculties so much feared by the artist. As a young girl she had decided never to enter a theater, not because she believed theater-going to be a sin, but because she had heard that “the moral tone of vocalists—actors—actresses—is understood to be lax and it behooves a Christian not to contribute to lax morals!” This bleak and narrow resolution she had kept; for other reasons she had given up other small pleasures until nothing was left for pure pleasure ~~But~~ her poetry. There alone an inspired delight, a serene and sensuous loveliness had entered; and now nothing

was left but her poetry. Looking up from her invalid couch she invoked the spirit of poetry as Shelley had once invoked the spirit of delight that came so rarely. Occasionally driven to despair by self-doubt and pain, she opened her heart to God in accents as painful as those cries overheard in the "terrible sonnets" of Gerard Manley Hopkins; but those moments which made her according to George Saintsbury "one of the great religious poets of the world" were now less frequent, and a note of gentle, plaintive quietism entered:

Lord, if of us who pierced Thee Thou spare one,
Spare yet one more to love Thy Face,
And yet another of poor souls undone,
Another, and another—God of grace,
Let mercy overrun.

It was important not to forgo pain or despair, even in her writing. It was this endless pain that made her conscious, too conscious, at times, of God's power and the helplessness of man. She was on the whole an excellent self-critic, and even when she felt that the Divine Spirit had withdrawn from her she went on working, knowing that the spirit of poetry came and went, and that she must possess her soul in patient industry. If the poems no longer came as if from a smiling Heaven, there was always a useful tract to be written, a letter of encouragement to some poet whose work showed proper piety, if not God-directed skill. By instinct she must have known, as every true artist knows, that to give up her art was to give up some vital principle that upheld the body as well as the soul. Sighing, she turned to the little writing desk Cayley had left her in his will, which she always used now. She must have felt that strength, health, and creative power would flow from his spirit to hers. "Can anything be sadder than work left unfinished? Yes: work never begun," she had written in one of the earlier notes in *Time Flies*.



*The Last Years: Solitude of Fire—
The Land of No More Night
(1892–1894)*

IN the spring of 1892 Christina Rossetti underwent an operation for cancer “skilfully and successfully performed,” her brother says. But that it was only a matter of time now, she knew in her heart. For the space of a year she felt a renewal of strength and energy, a false renewal of energy before the secret enemy struck again. Still she continued in her daily routine. She rose and retired early and spent some time at her writing desk. She tried to cultivate the rather forced cheerfulness noticed by Katharine Tynan; but from time to time friends noticed that the forced cheerfulness would drop away and a black terror, a fear of death, would overshadow the room in which she sat writing or would come between her and her prayers. Some of this despair entered her last poems, fragmentary short poems shot with even greater gloom than usual:

Is this the end? is there no end but this?
Yea, none beside:
No other end for pride
And foulness and besottedness.

• Alas for her amid man's helpless moan,
Alas for her!

She hath no comforter:
In solitude of fire she sits alone.

Years ago she had foreseen this terror, this sudden lack of consolation, in one of her most beautiful poems, "Love Is Strong As Death":

I have not sought Thee, I have not found Thee,
I have not thirsted for Thee:
And now cold billows of death surround me,
Buffeting billows of death astound me,—
Wilt Thou look upon, wilt Thou see
Thy perishing me?

Perhaps the portrait of the ill starred John Polidori looking down on her increased her depression. He had been her mother's favorite brother, his family had had such pride in him and his gifts. Afterward they had never mentioned him except to shudder and pray; and yet now from his portrait another face looked out, a face both sensual and spiritual—that of her brother Dante Gabriel. "The souls I might have succored, might have saved." John Polidori had died before she was born, but somehow his sin haunted her; it had a dreadful fascination. Did she too ever have moments when she dreamed of self-destruction? * Did Hell hold him eternally? Would prayers for him help? Would God hear them? We hear these thoughts made vocal only two years before her death:

Alas, alas! for the self-destroyed,
Vanish as images from a glass,
Sink down and die down by hope unbuoyed:—
Alas, alas!

* We know that Dante Gabriel attempted suicide once, and that the fact was kept from his sister and his mother,

Who shall stay their ruinous mass?
 Besotted, reckless, possessed, decoyed
 They hurry to the dolorous pass.

Saints fall a-weeping who would have joyed,
 Sore they weep for a glory that was,
 For a fulness emptied into the void,
 Alas, alas!

Or again we find a poem on the same theme, written at the same time, ending:

Gropes in its own grave the mole,
 Wedding darkness, undescrying,
 Tending to no different goal.

Self-slain soul, in vain thy sighing:
 Self-slain, who shall make thee whole?
 Vain the clamour of thy crying:
 Toll, bell, toll.

2

The long ordeal of dying was now before her, and to her horror she knew that, for all her fasting and prayer, her all too human faith had become inadequate. Even in her hours of hope and faith she had had her moments when like the poet Cowper she felt that God had singled her out to be the victim of his secret wrath. Salvation would never be hers; neither repentance, nor endless tears, nor her blameless life would avail. Ten years before, she had had a prophetic insight into what her deathbed would be; and now the reality was drawing very close:

Too dulled it may be for a last good-bye,
 Too comfortless for any one to soothe,
 A ~~harm~~less, charmless, spectacle of ruth.

While I supine with ears that cease to hear,
With eyes that glaze, with heart-pulse running down
(Alas, no saint rejoicing on her bed)
May miss the goal at last, may miss a crown.

"The pain that extends to life as a whole and loosens our hold on it is the only pain that is truly tragic," says Schopenhauer. Slowly the pain that was undermining her spirit as well as the cancer that was undermining her body worked together through the melancholy, life-relinquishing mournfulness of her final years.

The photographs of this period are painfully revealing: the long heavy eyelids seem swollen, the pure classical contours of her face sag; pain, resignation, rebellion, despair seem united at last in a passive tragic quietude.

Youth gone, and beauty gone, if ever there
Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this.

To a Mrs. Patchett Martin, who wanted a picture of her, Christina wrote in January, 1892, recommending a photograph, not a painting:

Of course if you aim at beauty rather than aught else there are photographs for sale from beautiful drawings by my brother, but what besides between his being my brother and his overmastering love of beauty I dare not recommend these with Eliot and Fry's.

And in doing this she recommended one of the least flattering of her later photographs, where she appears reading a book, dressed in decent black taffeta, a jet bonnet on her rigidly smooth hair, looking for all the world like an intense dark, exotic woman who had made the best attempt possible to look like Queen Victoria—and had failed. For though youth, lightness, and delicacy of figure had gone something in the strange smol-

dering calmness of the no longer youthful Christina carries with it an archaic and ageless loveliness, and strangeness.

3

There were still good works to do, causes that engaged her failing strength and made life warm and hopeful again. There was her old love for animals that made her sign antivivisection petitions. She had made many efforts to arouse her friends in this cause, and we find her writing to Frederic Shields requesting him to sign an enclosed petition to the Home Secretary "beseeching him not to license a so-called Institute for Preventive Medicine which will establish Pasteur's treatment and other horrors." She withdrew from the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge on hearing that it had published a book countenancing vivisection. Something of the quaintness and firmness of her character was evident in her remark to Mackenzie Bell that she flattered herself that she was able to discriminate between those she liked and those for whom she did not care. "Perhaps you are going into the country to kill something," she had said anxiously when Mr. Bell came to see her before leaving London.

When she was alone—and she was often alone—she sat in the shadowed drawing room and looked out on the street, listening vaguely (for she was drugging herself with sedatives) to the sound of rain and wind and human voices, and the irregular beating of her heart. Her doctor noticed and told William that she was given to long attacks of hysterical weeping. Sometimes she had strange dreams or fancies when she seemed to be surrounded by small animals. She once told William that she saw something that looked like pussy cats creeping about on a piece of black satin: they were looking for sleep, she said wildly. William told her it was a fancy of her exhausted brain and frame. Sometimes there was a pleasant moment when her young friend Lisa Wilson came bringing flowers, and later Watts-

Dunton arrived with proofs of the article he had written on her. "A very satisfactory article," William Michael had called it. Though Christina did not commit herself on such vanities it must have given her pleasure to know that her one gift had not been thrown away on a hostile or indifferent world. Her young relative, Ford Madox Hueffer, visited her two years before her death and wrote a striking description of her, moving slowly as if in a dream in "her dark box-like rooms." He remembered the shade of the black-trunked trees through the windows, that seemed to accentuate the mystery and gloom of the whole atmosphere around her. She was pleased to hear from her friend Mrs. Garnett that the 1890 reissue of her poems had had a large sale in the Christmas season, and she wrote to William Michael about it.

In the winter of 1893 Mary Cayley, a niece of her dear friend, visited her and was received with the affection of a near relative. Mary's aunts, Charles's sisters, were dead. Professor Arthur Cayley, who had seemed so successful in comparison with his brother, was an invalid. She now belonged to a generation that was beginning to count its dead. Mary had placed the pretty daffodils she had brought on the table when her young brother Henry looked in to fetch her. Christina noticed how tall he was, how very clever (he was studying architecture), and as they left she seemed to be parting with dream children of her own. She felt homesick for her young nieces, who were still abroad, and in April she wrote to William Michael in Italy with his sick wife that Torrington Square was being improved. "They have been doing up the Square really prettily just now, and I have been remembering the pleasant days when you and yours were all staying here, and Helen and Mary frequented the enclosure, and we used to muster cheerfully around *a ham!*"

The faint poignancy of the spring stirred her and made her long again for life and its fullness. Her passion for flowers that

had something mystical and remote in it revived again in the fine weather. No more welcome gift could come from a friend, and to Ellen Proctor, whose piety and love of flowers made her dear, she wrote in 1894: "Thank you for the flowers which bring a country charm and freshness to our world of brick and mortar. Not that I despise the Square trees which are greening delightfully. Those wild blue hyacinths have a special hold on me."

Another time she thanked Miss Proctor fervently for her gift of primroses and daisies "in their envelope of green," regretting that she was too ill and weak now to visit Highgate Cemetery and decorate her mother's grave. It was as if she were at last cut off from the sources of her own life and piety:

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on as if in pain.

Her vision of Jerusalem was very dark now, and not the golden vision of the young woman who had written of the multitudes she had seen arising in her dream of Paradise:

Made equal to the angels, glorious, fair;
With harps, palms, wedding-garments, kiss of peace,
And crowned and haloed hair.

With the ingrowing solitude and pain the few friends she found congenial became dearer and dearer to her. There was always Frederic Shields who reminded her so much of Cayley. Unlike his acquaintance Burne-Jones, he never attained much fame among the rich, who were the great art patrons. Ascetic, burning-eyed, he followed the gleam within him—a gentle, too sweet, Tennysonian gleam. While he painted his delicately pretty pictures, soft and gentle and weak and tinged with a

romantic charm, his soul like Christina's was tormented with the image of a devouring, overpowering God in whose mercy and goodness he had put his faith, but not his certain hope. Shields was writing in his journal of all the darkness that came tumbling over him as he tried to work. He enumerated his fears. They were dreadful, they were many: "fear of the wrath to come, fear of God, fear of the Devil, always the terrible fear; causing morbid depression, warring against courage and natural gaiety."

He turned to Christina with his fears, and she understood. To her, too, God's voice was becoming harsher and harsher. She prayed with greater abjectness, greater and greater humility, until kind William Michael lost patience and congratulated himself on being an agnostic.

Arthur Symons met her at Torrington Square at this time, and his visit was an act of homage from the young poets of the 1890's, whose work she either did not read or did not care to read. To young Symons, she was a romantic figure out of the past, doubly interesting because of her association with Dante Gabriel who had influenced his own early poetry and the early poetry of his friend William Butler Yeats. He watched her with his sensitive eyes and nervous brain, noticing traces still left of delicate Italian beauty. He noticed what less sensitive observers did not observe, the singular sensitivity and subtlety of her mind, her delicate sophistication—a sophistication that would not have been understood by her simpler admirers, Lisa Wilson, Mackenzie Bell, or Katharine Tynan. He noticed her acquaintance with certain names in literature then almost esoteric. She knew Leopardi by heart, she had read Baudelaire (though she withheld judgment on him), she spoke with appreciation of Turgenev. She was wise enough to avoid talk of contemporary poets with Symons. When he left she curtsied with great grace; and the action fascinated him, for that curtsy and that grace were fast going out of date. He had noticed how

often in her conversation thoughts and comments about death had appeared. She seemed obsessed by death, and her attitude to it appeared to be one of fear.

An illustrated edition of "Goblin Market" with designs by Laurence Housman appeared in 1892. It was characteristic of her rather painful politeness that she said nothing to Housman when he sent her the book, but instead sent it on to William Michael, writing across the wrapper the single word "Alas."

"Goblin Market" seemed to be having a revival, Kegan Paul wanted another illustrated edition, and she had scrupulously referred him to Macmillans, who held the copyright. Did she remember that time almost thirty years ago when her friend and publisher Alexander Macmillan had read the poem out loud to an audience of workingmen before whom he was lecturing on poetry! He had told her with pleasure of the warm response.

Thirty years! How imperceptibly they had passed! With her mother's death, she was like Dr. Johnson, who after his own great loss felt that his triumphs meant little since he was solitary and could not impart them. For even her brothers, kind, sensible William Michael and glowing Dante Gabriel, could never fill the lack of this strong figure who had meant security and warmth for them all. How good to meet people who had known and admired her mother! A visit from Ford Madox Brown shortly before his death had brought forth a grateful letter: "What a steely old friend he is: to me a very old friend as I knew him before I was twenty."

4

No attentions from old friends, no amount of the appreciation of one's work that is life to a writer's ego, could obscure the fact that her health was not improving since her last operation. She turned more and more to her childhood memories, that one

period when (she thought) she had really been happy, really gay. She took great pleasure in her pets and wrote to William Michael:

I am turned doctor myself! rubbing a kitten who appears weak (to say the least) in the hind legs with camphorated oil. . . . Such a pretty kitten, with such rich fur. And it stood up yesterday at the fender and made the Y of our childhood!

Her mother's death and the death of her last aunt had left her with what the novels of her day called "a modest competence," and she now had a cook, a housemaid, and her aunt's nurse, for she was very weak and often in pain. It was difficult to write new poems, but there were always other tasks. William Michael found her one day copying many of her later poems and arranging them carefully for her devotional calendar *Called to Be Saints*. "But why copy them?" he asked. She answered, "I have plenty of leisure now." The fact was that she wished to save money for the S.P.C.K., the publishers of her devotional works. She had also turned her royalties over to the society to be used for charity.

She also read more than she had ever read before, and her friends noticed that almost all of the books she was reading were still from her mother's library, an excellent old-fashioned one. Her nephew and nieces were a source of amazement to her, awe and amazement mingled with something that was not quite approval. Both Arthur and Olive were cramming for examinations; they were full of the new scientific knowledge, they were so advanced, so radical in politics, they certainly approved of the feminists. She took up her pen to admonish them: "If only they could share their old aunt's philosophy, and realize that not one triumph at a particular moment but the treasure amassed of useful and delightful knowledge must prove the permanent boon!" She drew them into discussions of Dante, but they were

at the moment jubilant over their success in their chemistry examinations. It was the nineteenth century governess admonishing the next century. In one of her last letters to Lucy Rossetti she mentions her niece Helen:

I wonder if Helen has been reading some of my old favourite Turguenieff [sic]. I fancy the first of his translated by our old friend Mr. Ralston. *Le Roi Léar de la Steppe* I greatly admired, but Gabriel did not quite agree with me. . . . I hope dear Helen will not appraise life quite according to any such pessimistic standard, but will use her great gifts to better purpose.

One of the great literary honors of the period came to her when G. F. Watts, the august and official portrayer of the literary great, asked her in 1893 to sit for her portrait, which was to be presented to the National Portrait Gallery. She expressed her disappointment: she was not well, there was her heart disease, her inability to sit for such a long period. William Michael always regretted this decision, he was a great admirer of Watts; and those who have seen a few of Watts's best portraits and do not believe that all Victorian painting necessarily is bad will regret her decision.

The days passed in Torrington Square, noiseless, hushed, expectant. It was pleasant now to have a little money to give to William Michael, when the strain of his wife's illness and his children's education proved too difficult for his overburdened shoulders. At one time his bank account after he had scrupulously drawn a check to pay Christina her share from Dante Gabriel's books was down to a balance of £ 76. Christina insisted on sending him a check for £ 100, saying that she knew her mother had wished to send it to Lucy, but couldn't manage it before she died.

In the spring of 1894 Lucy Rossetti's long-drawn agony ended, and poignant memories of the vivid dark-eyed girl who had been brought up in their household, whom she had loved, ad-

mired, and somewhat feared returned to her. Lucy had died with a fortitude that seemed strange to Christina, that almost seemed wrong. For all her fervent faith, Christina could not overcome her fear at the near approach of death. She grew more and more depressed as she measured her chances for salvation. One day she said to William Michael, "How dreadful to be wicked, for in hell you must be so eternally, not to speak of the matter of torments." Knowing her blameless life, William Michael wondered at that unreasonable self-accusation. Later he blamed her spiritual adviser, the Reverend Charles Gutch of St. Cyprian's Church, who had been severe and disturbing in his examination of her. William Michael felt that Dr. Gutch had played the role with Christina that Newton had played with Cowper, and that her overstrained religious sensibilities, like those of the older poet, had been driven almost to madness.

Her sense of unworthiness, of living under the shadow of some mysterious, unacted sin, became too painful to watch. And William Michael noticed that when the consolation and kindness of God might have been mentioned Dr. Gutch took it upon himself to be harsh and unhopeful. More and more she became a prey to nervous hysteria, and alone in her darkened bedroom she would be found weeping. To Mackenzie Bell she said: "This illness has humbled me. I have been proud before." The angel of death so often invoked in her poems, appearing often as beautiful in benignancy, took on a dark veiled aspect. How long ago was it that she had invoked this celestial messenger to come!

Mine Angel predilect:
Veiled or unveiled, benignant or austere,
Aloof or near;
Thine, therefore mine, elect.

But death did not appear before her as in her romantic, death-enraptured youth—a beautiful being crowned with roses, carry-

ing a single lily. The Angel predilect had now given place to the King of Terrors, and she was still alive, and the yellowish sun streamed through frosty winter windows.

5

On the 29th of December, 1894, Christina Rossetti died. In the last few days only a constant resort to opiates had kept her from agonizing pain. The old injunction "Pray without ceasing," she had again taken literally, and her last hours were spent in anguished but silent prayer. A few hours before the end, seeing William Michael at her bedside, she suddenly aroused herself and asked his forgiveness for what seemed to him a harmless deception. He had one time, long, long ago, asked her not to see people when she was unwell, and she had promised; but she had, she confessed, at one time seen Cayley at luncheon. "I was so fond of him," she murmured. When a letter from her friend Ellen Proctor was read to her by her brother she said irrelevantly: "I love everybody. If ever I had an enemy I should hope to meet and welcome that enemy in heaven."

If she had enemies neither William Michael nor anyone else had ever heard of them. Was she thinking of that fretful ghost, Dante Gabriel's wife? Soon they were to lie near each other in Highgate Cemetery. Her own last verses breathe a tranquillity strangely unlike the disquietude of her last hours:

Sleeping at last, the trouble and tumult over,
Sleeping at last, the struggle and horror past,
Cold and white, out of sight of friend and of lover,
Sleeping at last.

The God of Mercy and Love had appeared in a harsh guise to her who had shut herself off from life to please Him.

6

On the 2nd of January, Christina Rossetti was buried in Highgate Cemetery—in the same cemetery where Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, George Eliot, Mrs. Henry Wood, the author of *East Lynne*, and the scientist Michael Faraday lie buried. In this strange company, her earthly figure would have walked with ghostly unconcern, for the world and its incongruities of names and reputations had never had meaning for her.

Snow lay lightly on the ground at the funeral service, and when it was over the mourners noticed the hard light, crisp and sharp, that suddenly illumined the gray sky. Watts-Dunton (who never missed a distinguished funeral) remembered afterward hearing a robin burst into song as he left the cemetery. He was already thinking of the memorial article about her that he would no doubt discuss with his friend Swinburne. Swinburne, who had always admired Christina, prepared an elegiac poem on her; like most of his later poems it was choked with too many words, the old wonderful music faintly struggling through and giving some sense to the unbridled rhythm. But she who had written in the year of her death, "Let us look up to heaven full of mansions, rather than down to earth full of graves," had fulfilled her destiny. Except for Dante Gabriel, who sleeps near the sea at Birchington, she lies with those she loved; and under the dates of her birth and death is an inscription from the great Tuscan poet who had molded the childish thoughts and destinies of the Rossetti family:

Volsersi a me con salutevol cenno.

(“They turned to me with an act of salutation.”) Under this were her own lines, too humble not to seem wrong to those who admire her gifts:

Give me the lowest place: or if for me
That lowest place too high, make one more low
Where I may sit and see
My God and love Thee so.

One can imagine in some brilliant afterworld these familiar ghosts rising to meet her: her passionate father; the strong, overwhelming mother; Elizabeth Siddal from her rifled grave; William Michael's dear little baby son; her sister the intellectual and grave Maria; and, years later, William Michael himself grown old and worn with too many years. Of her literary immortality she had rarely spoken; but the press of the day suddenly remembered her existence and was loud in praise of a poet who had avoided all literary showmanship, and whose exquisite gifts were never wholly of this world. Andrew Lang, one of the most influential critics of the day, wrote after her death: "There can be little doubt that we are now deprived of the greatest English poet of her sex, which is made to inspire poetry rather than to create it."

Since Christina was not a feminist, no doubt she would have accepted this intolerable praise with proper humility.

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